LORD OAKBURN'S DAUGHTERS

MRS. HENRY WOOD

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BY

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"EAST LYNNE," "THE CHANNINGS," "JOHNNY LUDLOW," ETC.

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CHAPTER I.

THE ARRIVAL.

A SMALL country town in the heart of England was the scene some few years ago of a sad tragedy. I must ask my readers to bear with me while I relate it. These crimes, having their rise in the evil passions of our nature, are not the most pleasant for the pen to record; but it cannot be denied that they do undoubtedly bear for many of us an interest amounting almost to fascination. I think the following account of what took place will bear such an interest for you.

South Wennock, the name of this place, was little more than a branch or offshoot of Great Wennock, a town of some importance, situated at two miles' distance from it. The lines of rail from London and from other places, meeting at Great Wennock, did not extend themselves to South Wennock; consequently any railway travellers arriving at the larger town, had to complete their journey by the omnibus if they wished to go on to the smaller.

The two miles of road the omnibus had to traverse were about the worst to be met with in a civilized country. When it, the omnibus, had jolted its way over this road, it made its entrance to South Wennock in the very centre of the town. South Wennock might be said to consist of one long, straggling street, called High Street. Much building had been recently added to both ends of this old street. At the one end, the new buildings, chiefly terraces and semi-detached houses, had been named Palace Street, from the fact that the road led to the country palace of the bishop of the diocese. The new buildings at the other end of High Street were called the Rise, from the circumstance that the ground rose there gradually for a considerable distance; and these were chiefly detached villas, some small, some large.

On the afternoon of Friday, the 10th of March, 1848, the railway omnibus, a cramped vehicle, constructed to hold six, came jolting along its route as usual. South Wennock lay stretched out in a line

across it in front, for the road was at a right angle with the town, and could the omnibus have dashed on without reference to houses, and similar slight obstructions, it would have cut the town in two, leaving part of High Street and the Rise to its right, the other part and Palace Street to its left.

The omnibus was not given to dashing, however. It drove into High Street by the accustomed opening, turned short round to the left, and pulled up a few yards further at its usual halting-place, the Red Lion Inn. Mrs. Fitch, the landlady, an active, buxom dame, with a fixed colour in her cheeks and a bustling, genial manner, came hastening out to receive the guests it might have brought.

It had brought only a young lady and a trunk: and the moment Mrs. Fitch cast her eyes on the lady's face, she thought it the most beautiful she had ever looked upon.

"Your servant, miss. Do you please to stay here?"

"For a short time, while you give me a glass of wine and a biscuit," was the reply of the traveller: and the tone, accent, and manner were unmistakably those of a gentlewoman. "I shall be glad of the refreshment, for I feel exhausted. The shaking of the omnibus has been terrible."

She was getting out as she spoke, and something in her appearance more particularly attracted the attention of Mrs. Fitch, as the landlady helped her down the high and awkward steps, and marshalled her indoors.

"Dear ma'am, I beg your pardon! It does shake, that omnibus —and you not in a condition to bear it! And perhaps you have come far besides, too! You shall have something in a minute. I declare I took you for a young unmarried lady."

"If you happen to have any cold meat, I should prefer a sandwich to the biscuit," was all the reply given by the traveller.

She sat down in the landlady's cushioned chair, for it was to her own parlour Mrs. Fitch had conducted her, untied her bonnet, and threw back the strings. The bonnet was of straw, trimmed with white ribbons, and her dress and mantle were of dark silk. Never was bonnet thrown back from a more lovely face, with its delicate bloom and its exquisitely refined features.

"Can you tell me whether there are any lodgings to be had in South Wennock?" she inquired, when the landlady came in again with the sandwiches and wine.

"Lodgings?" returned Mrs. Fitch. "Well, now, they are not over-plentiful here; this is but a small place, you see, ma'am—not but what it's a deal larger than it used to be," continued the landlady, as she stroked her chin in deliberation. "There's Widow Gould's. I know her rooms were empty a week ago, for she was up here asking me if I couldn't hear of anybody wanting such.

You'd be comfortable there, ma'am, if she's not let. She's a quiet, decent body. Shall I send and inquire?"

"No, I would rather go myself. I should not like to take rooms without seeing them. Should these you speak of be engaged, I may see bills in other windows. Thank you, I cannot eat any more: I still seem to feel the jolting of that omnibus; and the fright it put me into has taken away my appetite. You will take care of my trunk for the present."

"Certainly, ma'am. What name?"

"Mrs. Crane."

The landlady stepped outside to direct the stranger on her way. Widow Gould's house was situated in the first terrace in Palace Street, and a walk of six or seven minutes brought Mrs. Crane to it. It had a card in the window, indicating that its rooms were to let. Widow Gould herself, a shrinking little woman, with a pinched, red face, came to the door. The lady wanted a sitting-room and bedroom: could she be accommodated with them? Mrs. Gould replied that she could, mentioned a very moderate charge, and invited her in to see the rooms. They were on the first floor; not large, but clean and sufficiently nice, the one room opening into the other. Mrs. Crane liked them very much.

"You perceive that I am expecting to be ill," she said. "Would that be an objection?"

"N—o, I don't see that it need," replied the widow after some consideration. "Of course you would have proper attendance, ma'am? I could not undertake that."

"Of course I should," said Mrs. Crane.

So the bargain was made. Mrs. Crane taking the rooms for a month, intimating that she preferred engaging them only from month to month, and the Widow Gould undertaking to supply all ordinary attendance. Mrs. Crane went back to the inn, to pay for the refreshment she had taken, and to desire her trunk to be sent to her, having ordered tea to be ready by her return to Palace Street.

She found everything prepared for her; a good fire burning in the sitting-room grate, the tea on the table, and Mrs. Gould in the adjoining room putting sheets on the bed. The widow was in spirits at the prospect of her rooms being wanted for some months, as she believed they would be, and had placed the last weekly South Wennock newspaper on the table beside the tea-tray, a little mark of extra attention to her new lodger.

In obedience to the ring when tea was over, Mrs. Gould came up to remove the things. Mrs. Crane was seated before them. A fair young girl she looked with her bonnet off, in her silk dress and her golden-brown hair. The widow kept no servant, but waited on her lodgers

herself. Her parlours were let to a permanent lodger, who was at that time absent from South Wennock.

"Be so good as take a seat," said Mrs. Crane to her, laying down the newspaper, which she appeared to have been reading. But Mrs. Gould preferred to stand, and began rubbing one shrivelled hand over the other, her habit when in waiting. "I have some information to ask of you. Never mind the tray; it can wait. First of all, what medical men have you at South Wennock?"

"There's the Greys," was Widow Gould's response.

A pause ensued, Mrs. Crane probably waiting to hear the list augmented. "The Greys?" she repeated, finding her informant did not continue.

"Mr. John and Mr. Stephen Grey, ma'am. There was another brother, Mr. Robert, but he died last year. Nice pleasant gentlemen all three, and they have had the whole of the practice here. Their father and their uncle had it before them."

"Do you mean to say there are no other medical men?" exclaimed the stranger, in some surprise. "I never heard of such a thing in a place as large as this appears to be."

"South Wennock has only got large lately, ma'am. The Greys were very much liked and respected in the place; and being three of them, they could get through the work, with an assistant. They always keep one. But there is another doctor here now, a gentleman of the name of Carlton."

"Who is he?"

"Well, I forget where it was said he came from; London, I think. A fine dashing gentleman as ever you saw, ma'am; not above thirty, at the most. He came suddenly among us a few months ago, took a house at the other end of the town, and set up against the Greys. He is getting on, I believe, especially with people that live on the Rise, mostly fresh comers, and he keeps his cabrioily."

"Keeps his what?"

"His cabrioily—a dashing one-horse carriage with a head to it. It is more than the Greys have ever done, ma'am; they have had their plain gig, and nothing else. Some think that Mr. Carlton has private property, and some think he is making a show to get into practice."

"Is he clever—Mr. Carlton?"

"There are those here who'll tell you he is cleverer than the two Greys put together; but, ma'am, I don't forget the old saying, New brooms sweep clean. Mr. Carlton, being new in the place, and having a practice to make, naturally puts out his best skill to make it."

The remark drew a laugh from Mrs. Crane. "But unless a doctor has the skill within him, he cannot put it forth," she said.

"Well, of course there's something in that," returned the widow,

reflectively. "Any way, Mr. Carlton is getting into practice, and it's said he is liked. There's a family on the Rise where he attends constantly, and I've heard they think a great deal of him. It's a Captain Chesney, an old gentleman, who has the gout perpetual. They came strangers to the place from a distance, and settled here; very proud, exclusive people, it's said. There's three Miss Chesneys; one of them beautiful; the other one's older; and the little one is but a child. Mr. Carlton attends there a great deal, for the old gentleman—— Good heart alive! what's the matter?"

Mrs. Gould might well cry out. The invalid—an invalid she evidently was—had turned of a ghastly whiteness, and was sinking back motionless in her chair.

Mrs. Gould was timid by nature, nervous by habit. Very much frightened, she raised the lady's head, but it fell back unconscious. In the excitement induced by the moment's terror, she flew down the stairs, shrieking out in the empty house, rushed out at her own back-door, ran through the yard, and burst into the back-door of the adjoining house. Two young women were in the kitchen; the one ironing, the other sitting by the fire and not doing anything.

"For the love of Heaven, come back with me, one of you!" called out the widow, in a tremor. "The new lady lodger I told you of this afternoon has gone and died right off in her chair."

Without waiting for assent or response, she flew back again. The young woman at the fire started from her seat, alarm depicted on her countenance. The other calmly continued her ironing.

"Don't be frightened, Judith," said she. "You are not so well used to Dame Gould as I am. If a blackbeetle falls on the floor, she'll cry out for aid. I used to think it was put on, but I have come at last to the belief that she can't help it. You may as well go in, however, and see what it is."

Judith hastened away. She was a sensible-looking young woman, pale, with black hair and eyes, and was dressed in new and good mourning. Mrs. Gould was already in her lodger's sitting-room. She had torn a feather from a small feather-duster hanging by the mantel-piece, had scorched the end, and was holding it to the unhappy lady's nose. Judith dashed the feather to the ground.

"Don't be so stupid, Mrs. Gould! What good do you suppose that will do? Get some water."

The water was procured, and Judith applied it to the face and hands, the widow looking timidly on. As the lady revived, Mrs. Gould burst into tears.

"It's my feelings that overcomes me, Judith," said she. "I can't abear the sight of illness."

"You need not have been alarmed," the invalid faintly said, as soon as she could speak. "For the last few months, since my health

has been delicate, I have been subject to these attacks of faintness; they come on at any moment. I ought to have warned you."

When fully restored, they left her to herself, Mrs. Gould carrying away the tea-things; having first of all unlocked the lady's trunk by her desire, and brought to her from it a small writing-case.

"Don't go away, Judith," the widow implored, when they reached the kitchen. "She may have another of those fits, for what we can tell—you heard her say she was subject to them—and you know what a one I am to be left with illness. It would be a charity to stop with me; and you are a lady at large just now."

"I'll go and get my work, then, and tell Margaret. But where's the sense of your calling it a fit, as if you were speaking of apoplexy?" added Judith.

When the girl came back—though, indeed, she was not much of a girl, being past thirty—Mrs. Gould had lighted a candle, for it was growing dark, and was washing the tea-things. Judith sat down to her sewing, her thoughts intent upon the lady upstairs.

"Who is she, I wonder?" she said aloud.

"Some stranger. Mrs. Fitch sent her down to me—I told Margaret about it this afternoon when you were out. I say, isn't she young?'

Judith nodded. "I wonder if she is married?"

"Married!" angrily retorted Mrs. Gould. "If the wedding-ring upon her finger had been a bear, it would have bit you. Where were your eyes?"

"All wedding-rings have not been put on in church," was the composed answer of the girl. "Not but that I dare say she is married, for she seems a modest, good lady; it was her being so young, and coming here in this sudden manner, all unprotected, that set me on the other thought. Where is her husband?"

"Gone abroad," she said. "I made free to ask her."

"Why does she come here?"

"I can't tell. It does seem strange. She never was near the place in her life before this afternoon, she told me, and had no friends in it. She has been inquiring about the doctors——"

"That's her bell," interrupted Judith, as the bell hanging over Mrs. Gould's head began to sound. "Make haste. I dare say she wants lights."

"She has got them. The candles were on the mantel-piece, and she said she'd light them herself."

A sealed note lay on the table when Mrs. Gould entered the drawing-room. The lady laid her hand upon it.

"Mrs. Gould, I must trouble you to send this note for me. I did not intend to see about a medical man until to-morrow; but I feel fatigued and ill, and I think I had better see one to-night. He may be able to give me something to calm me."

"Yes, ma'am. They live almost close by, the Greys. But, dear lady, I hope you don't feel as if you were going to be ill!"

Mrs. Crane smiled. Her nervous landlady was rubbing her hands together in an access of trembling.

"Not ill in the sense I conclude you mean it. I do not expect that for these two months. But I don't want to alarm you with a second fainting-fit. I am in the habit of taking drops, which do me a great deal of good, and I unfortunately left them behind me, so I had better see a doctor. Was that your daughter who came up just now? She seemed a nice young woman."

The question offended Mrs. Gould's vanity beyond everything. She believed herself to be remarkably young-looking, and Judith was two and thirty if she was a day.

"No, indeed, ma'am, she's not; and I've neither chick nor child," was the resentful answer. "She's nothing but Judith Ford, sister to the servant at the next door; and being out of place, her sister's mistress said she might come there for a few days while she looked out. I'll get her to carry the note for me."

Mrs. Gould took the note from the table, and was carrying it away without looking at it, when the lady called her back.

"You see to whom it is addressed, Mrs. Gould?"

Mrs. Gould stopped, and brought the note close to her eyes. She had not her spectacles upstairs, and it was as much as she could do to see anything without them.

"Why—ma'am! It—it—it's to Mr. Carlton."

The lady looked surprised in her turn. "Why should it not be to Mr. Carlton?" she demanded.

"But the Greys are sure and safe, ma'am. Such a thing has never been known as for them to lose one of their lady patients."

Mrs. Crane paused, apparently in indecision. "Has Mr. Carlton lost them?"

"Well—no; I can't remember that he has. But, ma'am, he attends one where the Greys attend ten."

"When you were speaking this evening of the doctors, I almost made up my mind to engage Mr. Carlton," observed Mrs. Crane. "I think men of skill struggling into practice should be encouraged. If you have anything really serious to urge against him, that is quite a different thing, and you should speak out."

"No, ma'am, no," was the widow's reply; "and I am sure it has been rude of me to object to him, if your opinion lies that way. I don't know a thing against Mr. Carlton; people call him clever. I am naturally prejudiced in favour of the Greys, for Mr. John has attended me ever since he grew up, as his father did before him. I'll send this down to Mr. Carlton's."

"Let it go at once, if you please. I should like, if possible, to see him to-night."

Mrs. Gould descended to the kitchen. On the dresser, staring her in the face when she entered, lay her spectacles. She put them on, and looked at the superscription on the note.

"Well, now, that's a curious thing, if ever there was one! 'Lewis Carlton, Esq.!' How did she know his name was Lewis? I never mentioned it. I couldn't mention it, for I did not know it myself. Is his name Lewis?"

"For all I can tell," responded Judith. "Yes," she added, more decisively, "of course it is Lewis; it is on his door-plate. Perhaps Mrs. Fitch told her."

"There! that's it!" exclaimed the widow, struck with sudden conviction. "Mrs. Fitch has been speaking up for him, and that's what has put her on to Mr. Carlton, and off the Greys. There was a traveller ill at the Red Lion in the winter, and he had Mr. Carlton. It's a shame of Mrs. Fitch to turn round on old friends."

"I can tell you where she got the name from, though perhaps Mrs. Fitch did speak for him," cried Judith suddenly. "There's his card—as they call it—in that newspaper you lent her, 'Mr. Lewis Carlton: Consulting Surgeon.' She couldn't fail to see it. Is she ill, that she is sending for him? She looks not unlikely to be."

"I say, Judy, don't go frightening a body like that," cried the woman, in tremor. "She won't be ill for these two months; but that nasty omnibus has shook her, and I suppose the faint finished it up. Oh, it rattles over the road without regard to folk's bones. You'll take this for me, won't you, Judith?"

"I dare say!" returned Judith.

"Come, do; there's a good woman! I can't go myself, for fear her bell should ring. It's a fine night, and the run will do you good."

Judith, not to be unaccommodating, rose from her seat. "There now!" she exclaimed, in a tone of vexation, as she took the note, "how am I to get my things? Margaret's gone out, and she is sure to have bolted the back-door. I don't like to disturb old Mrs. Jenkinson; the night's coldish, or I'd go without my bonnet rather than do it."

"Put on mine," suggested Mrs. Gould. "You are welcome to it, and to my shawl too."

Judith laughed; and she laughed still more when arrayed in Mrs. Gould's things. The shawl did very well, but the bonnet was large, one of those called a "poke," and she looked like an old woman in it. "Nobody will fall in love with me to-night, that's certain," said she, as she sped off.

Mr. Carlton's house was situated at the other end of the town, just before the commencement of the Rise. It stood by itself, on the

left; a handsome white house, with iron railings round it, and a pillared portico in front. Judith ascended the steps and rang the bell.

The door was flung open by a young man in livery. "Can I see Mr. Carlton?" she asked.

The man superciliously threw back his head. Judith's large old bonnet did not tell in her favour. "Is it on perfessional business?" he questioned.

"Yes, it is."

"Then perhaps, mem, you'll have the obleegance to walk round to the perfessional entrance; and that's on that there side."

He waved his hand condescendingly to the side of the house. Judith complied, but she gave him a word at parting.

"Pray, how much wages do you earn?"

"If ever I heered such a question put to a gentleman!" cried the man, in astonishment. "What is it to you?"

"Because I should judge that you get so much paid you for your clothes, and so much for your airs."

Passing down the steps, and out of reach of sundry compliments he honoured her with in return, she went to the side, and found herself in front of a door with "Surgery" painted on it. It opened to a passage, and thence to a small square room, whose walls were lined with bottles. A boy in buttons was lying at full length on the counter, whistling a shrill note, and kicking his heels in the air. Her entrance startled him, and he tumbled off, feet foremost.

It was still twilight, and not at first did he take in Judith's appearance; but soon the poke bonnet disclosed itself to view.

"Hulloa!" cried he. "Who are you? What do you want?"

"I want Mr. Carlton. Is he at home?"

"No, he isn't."

"Then you must go out and find him. This note must be instantly given to him. A lady wants to see him to-night."

"Then I'm afeared want must be the lady's master," returned the impudent boy. "Perhaps we might get this note tied on to the telegraph-wires, and send it to him that fashion; there ain't no other way of doing it. Mr. Carlton went off to London this morning."

"To London!" repeated Judith, surprise checking her inclination to box the young gentleman's ears. "When is he coming home again?"

"When his legs bring him. There! He'll be home in a couple of days," added the boy, dodging out of Judith's reach, and deeming it as well to cease his banter. "His father, Dr. Carlton, was took ill, and sent for him. Now you know."

"Well," said Judith, after a pause of consideration, "you had better take charge of this note, and give it to him when he does

come home. I don't know anything else that can be done. And I'd recommend you not to be quite so free with your tongue, unless you want to come to grief," was her parting salutation, as she quitted the boy and the house.

CHAPTER II.

HAPPILY OVER.

As Judith Ford went back through the lighted streets, the landlady of the Red Lion was standing at her door.

"Good evening, Mrs. Fitch."

"Why, who—why, Judith, it's never you! What on earth have you been making yourself such a guy as that for?"

Judith laughed, and explained how it was that she happened to be out in Mrs. Gould's things, and where she had been to. "After all, my visit has been a useless one," she remarked, "for Mr. Carlton is away. Gone to London, that impudent boy of his said."

"I could have told you so, and saved you the trouble of a walk, had I seen you passing," said Mrs. Fitch. "His groom drove him to the Great Wennock station this morning, and called here as he came back for a glass of ale. Is the lady ill?"

"She does not seem well; she had a fainting-fit just after tea, and thought she had better see a doctor at once."

"And Dame Gould could send for Mr. Carlton! What have the Greys done to her?"

"Dame Gould thought you recommended Mr. Carlton to the lady."

"I!" exclaimed Mrs. Fitch; "well, that's good! I never opened my lips to the lady about any doctor at all."

"It was her own doing to send for Mr. Carlton, and Mrs. Gould thought you must have spoken for him."

"Not I. If I had spoken for any it would have been for the Greys, who are our old fellow-townspeople; not but what Mr. Carlton is a nice pleasant gentleman; skilful too. Look here, Judith, you tell Dame Gould that when the time comes for the young lady to be ill, if there's currant jelly wanted for her, or any little matter of that sort, she can send to me for it, and welcome. I don't know when I have seen such a sweet young lady."

Judith gave a word of thanks, and sped on towards Palace Street. She had barely rung the bell when she heard Mrs. Gould flounder-ing downstairs in hot haste. She flung open the door, and seized upon Judith.

"Oh, Judith, thank Heaven you are come! What on earth's to be done? She is taken ill!"

"Taken ill!" repeated Judith.

"She is, she is, really ill; it's as true as that you are living. Where's Mr. Carlton?"

Judith made no reply. Shaking off the timorous woman, and the shawl and bonnet at the same time, which she thrust into her hands, she sped up to the sitting-room. Mrs. Crane was clasping the arm of the easy-chair, in evident pain; the combs were out of her hair, which now fell in wavy curls on her neck, and she moaned aloud in what looked like terror, as she cast her fair girlish face up to Judith. Never, Judith thought, had she seen eyes so wondrously beautiful; they were large tender brown eyes, soft and mournful, and they and their peculiarly sweet expression became fixed from that hour in Judith's memory.

"Don't be cast down, poor child," she said, forgetting ceremony in her compassion. "Lean on me. It will be all right."

She laid her head on Judith's shoulder. "Will Mr. Carlton be long?" she moaned. "Cannot some one go and hurry him?"

"Mr. Carlton can't come, ma'am," was Judith's answer. "He went to London this morning."

A moment's lifting of the head, a sharp cry of disappointment, and the poor head fell again and the face was hidden. Judith strove to impart comfort.

"They are all strangers to you, ma'am, so what can it matter? I know you cannot fail to like the Greys as well as you would Mr. Carlton. Nay, dear young lady, don't take on so. Every one likes Mr. John and Mr. Stephen Grey. Why should you have set your mind on Mr. Carlton?"

She lifted her eyes, wet with tears, whispering in Judith's ear.

"I cannot afford to pay both, and it is Mr. Carlton I have written to."

"Pay both! of course not!" responded Judith in a warm tone. "If Mr. Carlton can't come because he is away, and Mr. Grey attends for him, there'll be only one of them to pay. Doctors understand all that, ma'am. Mr. Carlton might take Mr. Grey's place with you as soon as he is back again, if you particularly wish for him."

"I did wish for him; I do wish for him. Some friends of mine know Mr. Carlton well, and they speak highly of his skill. They recommended him to me."

That explains it, thought Judith, but she was interrupted by a quaking, quivering voice beside her.

"What in the world will be done?"

It was Widow Gould's, of course. Judith scarcely condescended to answer: strong in sense herself, she had no sympathy with that sort of weakness.

"The first thing for you to do is to leave off being an idiot; the second is, to go and fetch one of the Mr. Greys."

"I will not have the Mr. Greys," spoke the young lady peremptorily, lifting her head from the cushion of the easy-chair, where she had now laid it. "I don't like the Mr. Greys, and I will not have them."

"Then, ma'am, you must have been prejudiced against them!" exclaimed Judith.

"True," said Mrs. Crane; "so far as that I have heard they are not clever."

Judith could only look her utter astonishment. The Greys not clever! But Mrs. Crane interposed against further discussion.

"I may not want either of them, after all," she said; "I am feeling easy again now. Perhaps if you leave me alone I shall sleep a little."

They arranged the cushions about her comfortably, and went downstairs, where a half-dispute ensued. Judith reproached Mrs. Gould for her childish cowardice, and that lady retorted that if folks were born timid they couldn't help themselves. In the midst of it, a cry came from above, and Judith flew up. Mrs. Gould followed, taking her leisure over it, and met the girl, who had come quickly down again, making for the front door.

"One of the Mr. Greys must be got here, whether or not," she said in passing; "she's a great deal worse."

"But, Judy, look here," were the arresting words of the widow. "Who'll be at the responsibility? She says she won't have the Greys, and I might have to pay them out of my own pocket."

"Nonsense!" retorted Judith. "I wouldn't bring up pockets, if I were you, when a fellow-creature's life is at stake. You go up to her then; perhaps you can do that."

Judith hastened into the street. The two brothers lived in houses adjoining each other, situated about midway between Mrs. Gould's and the Red Lion Inn. Mr. John, generally called Mr. Grey, occupied the larger house, which contained the surgery and laboratory; Mr. Stephen the smaller one. Mr. Stephen, the younger, had married when he was only twenty-one, and he now wanted a year or two of forty; Mr. John had more recently married, and had a troop of very young children.

The hall-door of Mr. John's house stood open, and Judith went in, guided by the bright lamp in the fanlight. Too hurried to stand upon ceremony, she crossed the hall and pushed open the surgery door. A handsome, gentlemanly lad of sixteen stood there, pounding drugs with a pestle and mortar. Not perhaps that the face was so handsome in itself; but its exceeding intelligence, the broad, intellectual forehead, the honest expression of the large and earnest blue eyes, would have made the beauty of any countenance. He was the son and only child of Mr. Stephen Grey.

"What, is it you, Judith?" he exclaimed, turning his head quickly as she entered. "You come gliding in like a ghost."

"Because I am in haste, Master Frederick. Are the gentlemen at home?"

"Papa is. Uncle John's not."

"I want to see one of them, if you please, sir."

The boy vaulted off, and returned with Mr. Stephen: a merry-hearted man with a merry and benevolent countenance, who never suffered the spirits of his patients to go down while he could keep them up. A valuable secret in medical treatment.

"Well, Judith, and what's the matter with you?" he jokingly asked. "Another tooth to be drawn?"

"I'll tell my errand to yourself, sir, if you please."

Without waiting to be sent away, Frederick Grey retired from the surgery and closed the door. Judith gave an outline of the case to Mr. Stephen Grey.

He looked grave; grave for him; and paused a moment when she had ceased.

"Judith, girl, we would prefer not to interfere with Mr. Carlton's patients. It might appear, look you, as though we grudged him the few he had got together, and would wrest them from him. We wish nothing of the sort: the place is large enough for us all."

"And what is the poor young lady to do, sir? To die?"

"To die!" echoed Stephen Grey. "Heaven forbid."

"But she may die, sir, unless you or Mr. Grey can come to her aid. Mr. Carlton can be of no use to her; he is in London."

Mr. Stephen Grey felt the force of the argument. While Mr. Carlton was in London, the best part of a hundred miles off, he could not be of much use to any one in South Wennock.

"True, true," said he, nodding his head. "I'll go back with you, Judith. Very young, you say? Where's her husband?"

"Gone travelling abroad, sir," replied Judith, somewhat improving upon the information supplied by Mrs. Gould. "Is there no nurse that can be sent in, sir?" she continued. "I never saw such a stupid woman as that Mrs. Gould is in illness."

"Nurse? To be sure. Time enough for that. Frederick," Mr. Stephen called out to his son, as he crossed the hall, "if your uncle comes in before I am back, tell him I am at Widow Gould's. A lady who has come to lodge there, is taken ill."

Judith ran on first, and got back before Mr. Stephen. Somewhat to her surprise, she found Mrs. Crane seated at the table, writing.

"You are better, ma'am!"

"No, I am worse. This has come upon me unexpectedly, and I must write to apprize a friend."

The perspiration induced by pain was running off her as she

spoke. She appeared to have written only two or three lines, and was thrusting the letter into an envelope. Mrs. Gould stood by, helplessly rubbing her hands, her head shaking with a tremulous motion, as though she had St. Vitus's dance.

"Will you post it for me?"

"Yes, sure I will, ma'am," replied Judith, taking the note which she held out. "But I fear it is too late to go to-night."

"It cannot be helped: post it at all risks. And you had better call on one of the medical gentlemen you spoke of, and ask him to come and see me."

"I have been, ma'am," replied Judith in a glow of triumph. "He is following me down. And that's his ring," she added, as the bell was heard. "It is Mr. Stephen Grey, ma'am; Mr. Grey was not at home. Of the two brothers, Mr. Stephen is the pleasantest, but they are both nice gentlemen. You can't fail to like Mr. Stephen."

She went out with the letter, glancing at the superscription. It was addressed to London, to a Mrs. Smith. On the stairs she encountered Mr. Stephen Grey.

"I suppose I am too late for the post to-night, sir?" she asked. "It is a letter from the lady."

Mr. Stephen took out his watch. "Not if you make a run for it, Judith. It wants four minutes to the time of closing."

Judith ran off. She was light and active, one of those to whom running is easy; and she saved the post by half-a-minute. Mr. Stephen Grey meanwhile, putting the Widow Gould aside with a merry nod, entered the room alone. Mrs. Crane was standing near the table; one hand lay on it, the other was pressed to her side, and her anxious, beautiful eyes were strained on the door. As they fell on the doctor an expression of relief came into her face. Mr. Stephen went up to her, wondering at her youth. He took one of her hands in his, and looked down with his reassuring smile.

"And now tell me what is the matter?"

She kept his hand, as if there were protection in it, and the tears came into her eyes as she raised them to him, speaking in a whisper.

"I am in great pain: such pain! Do you think I shall die?"

"Die!" cheerily echoed Mr. Stephen. "Not you. You may talk about dying in some fifty or sixty years to come, perhaps; but not now. Come, sit down, and let us have a little quiet chat together."

"You seem very kind, and I thank you," she said; "but before going further, I ought to tell you that I am Mr. Carlton's patient, for I had written to engage him before I knew he was away. I have come an entire stranger to South Wennock, and I had heard of Mr. Carlton's skill from some friends."

"Well, we will do the best we can for you until Mr. Carlton's return, and then leave you in his hands. Are you quite alone?"

"It happens unfortunately that I am. I have just sent a note to the post to summon a friend. You see I never expected to be ill for the next two months."

"And very likely you will not be," returned Mr. Stephen. "When you shall have half-a-dozen children about you, young lady, you will know what importance to attach to false alarms. Your husband is abroad, I hear?"

She inclined her head in the affirmative.

But it was no false alarm. The lady grew worse with every minute; and when Judith came back she met Mr. Stephen coming forth from the bedroom.

"You must help me, Judith," he said. "Dame Gould is utterly useless. First of all, look into the lady's travelling trunk. She says there are baby's clothes and other things there. Make haste over it."

"I'll do anything and everything I can, sir," replied Judith; "but I'd *make* her useful. I have no patience with her."

"I'll make her useful in one way if I don't in another. Where is she now?"

"Sitting on the stairs outside, sir, with her hands to her ears."

"Oh!" said Mr. Stephen, and he went out to the widow.

"Mrs. Gould, you know Grote's Buildings?"

"Of course, sir, I do," was the whimpered answer, as she rose. "Oh, sir, I'm shook!"

"Go there without delay: you can shake as you go along, you know. Ask for Mrs. Hutton, and desire her to come here to me immediately. Tell her the nature of the case."

Mrs. Gould lost no time in starting, glad to be out of the house. She returned with a short, stout barrel of a woman, with grizzled hair and black eyes. She was attired in a light-coloured print gown, and went simpering into the room, carrying a bundle, and dropping curtseys to Mr. Stephen Grey. Mr. Stephen stared at the woman for a full minute, as if disbelieving his own eyes, and his face turned to severity.

"Who sent for you, Mrs. Pepperfly?"

"Well, sir; please, sir, I came," was the response, the curtseys dropping all the while. "You sent for Hutton, sir; but she were called out this afternoon; and I was a stopping at number three, and thought I might come in her place."

"Hutton was called out this afternoon?"

"This very blessed afternoon what's gone, sir, just as four o'clock was a striking from St. Mark's Church. Mrs. Gilbert on the Rise is took with fever again, sir, and she won't have nobody but Hutton to nurse her."

Mr. Stephen Grey ran over the sisterhood of nurses in his mind,

but could think of none available just then. He beckoned the woman from the room.

"Hark ye, Mother Pepperfly," he said in a stern tone. "You know your failing; now, if you dare to give way to it this time, as you have done before, you shall never again nurse a patient of mine or my brother's. You can do your duty—none better—if you choose to keep in a fit state to do it. Take care you do so."

Mrs. Pepperfly squeezed out a tear. She'd be upon her Bible oath, if Mr. Stephen chose to put her to it, not to touch nothing stronger than table beer. Mr. Stephen, however, did not put her to the ordeal.

There was sufficient bustle in the house that night; but by the morning quiet and peace had supervened; and Nurse Pepperfly, on her best behaviour, was carrying about, wrapped in flannel, a wee, wee infant.

Judith had not left Mrs. Crane's side during the night, and the latter appeared to be drawn to her by some attraction, to find comfort in her genuine sympathy.

"You have been a good girl, Judith," Mr. Stephen said to her as he was leaving in the morning, and she went down to open the door for him.

"Will she do well, sir?" asked Judith.

"Famously," answered Mr. Stephen. "Never had a safer case in my life. Give a look to Mother Pepperfly, Judith. I trust her as far as I can see her. I shall be back in a couple of hours."

Things went on well during the day. Mrs. Pepperfly busied herself chiefly with the baby, nursing it by the fire in the sitting-room; Judith attended on the sick lady. In the afternoon, Mrs. Crane, who was lying awake, suddenly addressed her.

"Judith, how is it you are able to be with me? I thought the landlady told me you were in service."

"Not just now, ma'am. I have been in service, but have left my place, and am stopping with my sister, at the next door, while I look out for another."

"Does your sister let lodgings, as Mrs. Gould does?"

"A lady lives at the next door, a Mrs. Jenkinson," was Judith's reply, "and my sister is her servant. Margaret has lived with her going on for eleven years."

"So that just now you are at liberty?"

"Quite so, ma'am."

"See now how merciful God is!" spoke Mrs. Crane, placing her hands together in an attitude of reverence. "Last night, when I began to feel ill, and thought I should have no one about me but that timid Mrs. Gould, I turned sick with perplexity,—with fear, I may say,—at the prospect of being left with her. And then you

seemed to be raised up for me, as it were on purpose, and can be with me without let or hindrance. None but those who have stood in need of it," she added, after a pause, "can know the full extent of God's mercy."

A glow, partly of pleasure, partly of shame, came over Judith's face as she listened. In a little corner of her inmost heart there had lurked a doubt whether it was all as straight as it ought to be with the young lady who had come there in so strange a manner—whether that plain gold ring on her finger had been a genuine wedding-ring, or only a bauble placed there to deceive. The reverential words of trust convinced Judith that the lady, whoever she might be, and whatever might be the mystery, was as honest as she was, and she took shame to herself for having doubted her. No girl, living a life of sin, could speak with that unaffected simplicity of the goodness of God. At least, so felt Judith.

"I think, Judith, you must have been accustomed to attend on the sick?"

"Pretty well, ma'am. In my last place, where I lived four years, my mistress's sister was bedridden, and I waited on her. She was a great sufferer. She died just three weeks ago, and they did not want me any more: that's why I am changing places."

"The mourning you wear is for her?"

"Yes, it is, ma'am. Mr. Stephen Grey was her doctor, and never failed to come every day all those four years; so that I feel quite at home with him, if that is a proper expression for a servant to use when speaking of a gentleman."

"What was the matter with her?"

"It was an inward complaint, causing her distressing pain. We were always trying fresh remedies to give her ease, but they did not do much good. I don't fancy Mr. Stephen ever thought they would; but she would have them tried. Ah, ma'am! we talk about suffering, and pity it, when people are laid up for a week or two; but only think what it must be to lie by for years, and be in acute pain night and day!"

The tears had come into Judith's eyes at the remembrance. Mrs. Crane looked at her. She had a large, full forehead, strongly marked. One, gifted with phrenological lore, would have pronounced her largely gifted with concentration and reticence. Good qualities when joined to an honest heart.

"Judith, where was my workbox put to?"

"It is here, ma'am, on the drawers."

"Unlock it, will you? You will find my keys somewhere about. Inside the little compartment that lifts up, you will see a locket set round with pearls."

Judith did as she was bid, and brought forth the locket. It was

a charming little trinket of blue enamel, the gold rim round it studded with pearls, and a place for hair in the front. A very fine gold chain, about two inches long, was attached to it; so that it could be worn as a necklace, or as a pendant to a bracelet.

"Take it, Judith. It is for you."

"Oh, ma'am!"

"That is my own hair inside; but you can take it out if you like, and put in your sweetheart's. I dare say you have one."

"A costly thing like this is not fit for me, ma'am. I could not think of taking it."

"But it is fit for you, and I'm glad to give it you; and I owe you a great deal more than that, for what I should have done without you I don't know," reiterated the invalid. "Put it up in your treasure-box, Judith."

"I'm sure I don't know how to say enough thanks," spoke Judith in her gratitude. "I shall keep it to my dying day, dear lady, and store up the hair in it for ever."

CHAPTER III.

THE ENCOUNTER AT THE RAILWAY STATION.

"HARK! what hour can that be?"

The question came from Mrs. Crane. She had been dozing, and awoke with a start at the striking of the Widow Gould's kitchen clock.

"It is eight, ma'am," replied Judith from her seat near the bed.

"Eight! why, you told me the London train came in at seven."

"To Great Wennock it does; or, rather, a quarter before it. The omnibus gets here about half-past seven. It is in, I know, ma'am, for I saw it taking a passenger through the town."

"Then where can she be?—the—the person I sent for yesterday," returned Mrs. Crane in excitement. "She would get the letter this morning, and might have come off at once. You are sure you posted it in time last night, Judith?"

"Quite sure, ma'am; but there will be another train in late to-night."

Mrs. Crane lay for a little time in thought. Presently she spoke again: "Judith, do you think my baby will live?"

"I don't see why it should not live, ma'am. It is certainly very little, but it seems quite healthy. I think it would have a better chance if you would nurse it, instead of letting it be brought up by hand."

"But I have told you I cannot," said Mrs. Crane, and the tone bore a peremptory sound. "It would not be convenient to me. Mrs. Smith will see about it when she comes, and it is on his

account, poor little fellow, that I am impatient for her. I am so pleased it's a boy."

"Ma'am, do you think you ought to talk so much?" asked Judith.

"Why should I not?" quickly returned the invalid. "I am as well as I can be: Mr. Stephen Grey said this afternoon he wished all his patients did as well as I am doing. Judith, I am glad I had Mr. Stephen Grey. What a kind man he is! He did nothing but cheer me up from first to last."

"I think that is one great secret why all Mr. Stephen's patients like him so much," observed Judith.

"I am sure I like him," was the lady's answer. "Mr. Carlton could not have done better for me than he has done."

The evening and night passed, bringing not the expected visitor, and the invalid began to display symptoms of restlessness. On the following morning Mrs. Smith arrived, having evidently travelled by the night-train. This was Sunday; the baby having been born early on the Saturday morning. At least, some one arrived; a hard-featured, middle-aged woman, who was supposed by the household to be the Mrs. Smith expected. Mrs. Crane did not say, and caused herself to be shut up with the stranger.

The sitting-room and bedroom, it has been remarked, communicated with each other. Each had also a door opening on to rather a spacious landing, spacious in proportion to the size of the house. At one end of this landing was a large window that looked out on the street; at the other end, opposite, was a closet, and the doors of the two rooms were on one side; the railings of the balustrades were opposite the doors. It is as well to explain this, as you will find later.

Mrs. Pepperfly and Judith sat in the front room, the sitting-room, the stranger being shut up with the invalid. Their voices could be heard in conversation, it almost seemed in dispute. Mrs. Smith's tones were full of what sounded like a mixture of lamentation, complaint, persuasion, remonstrance; and the sick lady's were angry and retorting. The nurse was of a constitution to take things coolly, but Judith was apprehensive for the effect of the excitement on the invalid. Neither of them liked to interfere; Mrs. Crane having peremptorily ordered them not to disturb her with her friend. Suddenly the door between the two rooms was thrown open, and this friend appeared.

The nurse was lying back idly in her chair, jogging the infant on her lap, after the approved nurse fashion; Judith sat at the window, crimping a little cap border with a silver knife. Mrs. Smith, who had taking off neither bonnet nor shawl, caught up the child; and carrying it to the window, examined its face attentively.

"It is not like *her*," she remarked to Judith, jerking her head in the direction of the bedroom.

"How can you judge yet awhile?" asked Judith. "It's nothing but a poor little mite at present."

"Mite? I never saw such a mite! One can hardly believe such an atom could be endowed with life."

"You can't expect a child born before its time to be a giant," remarked Mrs. Pepperfly as she passed into the next room.

"Before its time, indeed!" irascibly echoed the stranger. "What business had she to be exposing herself to railway jerks and shaking omnibuses? Nasty dangerous things! The jolts of that omnibus sent me flying up to its top, and what must they have done by a slight young thing such as she is? Now, a mile of ruts to get over; now, a mile of flint stones! I think the commissioners of roads here must all be abed and asleep."

"People are continually talking of the badness of the road between this and the Great Wennock Station," observed Judith. "It is said that Mr. Carlton made a complaint to the authorities, telling them it was ruin to his horse and carriage to go over it. Then they had those flint stones laid down, and that has made it worse."

"Who's Mr. Carlton?"

"He is one of the medical gentlemen living down here."

"And why couldn't they attend to his complaint?"

"I suppose they did attend to it; they put the flint stones down in places afterwards, and they had done nothing to the road for years."

"What has this child been fed on?" demanded Mrs. Smith, abruptly quitting the unsatisfactory subject of the roads.

"Barley-water and milk, half and half," replied Judith. "It was a puzzle to Mrs. Pepperfly at first what to give it, as it's so small."

"I don't like the look of her," curtly returned the stranger, alluding to Mrs. Pepperfly.

"If we were all bought and sold by our looks, some of us would remain on hand, and she's one," said Judith. "But she has her wits about her; provided she keeps sober, there's not a better nurse living, and when people know her failing they can guard against it."

"What are you? another nurse?"

"I am only a neighbour. But the lady took a fancy to me, and I said I would stop with her a few days. My home just now is at the next door, so I can run in and out. I am sure she is a lady," added Judith.

"She is a lady born and bred, but she took and married as—as I think she ought not to have married. But she won't hear a word said against him."

"Will he be coming here?" continued Judith.

"It's no business of mine whether he comes or not. They'll do as they please, I suppose. Where's this infant's things? They must be made into a bundle; and some food prepared for it."

"You are not going to take the baby away!" exclaimed Judith, looking all amazement.

"Indeed, but I am. The trains don't run thick on a Sunday; but there's one leaves the station at seven, and I shall travel by it."

"And you are thinking to take this little mortal all the way to London?" said Judith breathlessly.

"There's no reason why I shouldn't take it away, and there's a reason why I should," persisted Mrs. Smith. "Whether it's to London, or whether it's elsewhere, is my affair. Wrapped in flannel and lying in my arms in a first-class carriage, it will take no more harm than in this room."

Judith felt that it was not her place to interfere with Mrs. Crane's arrangements, whatever they might be, or to put prying questions to the stranger before her, and she relapsed into silence.

"You were expected last night, ma'am," said Mrs. Pepperfly, returning to the room from the inner chamber.

"I dare say I was," was the curt answer. "But I couldn't come. I travelled all night to come as soon as I did."

"And you'll travel all night again to-night?" questioned the nurse.

"It won't kill me."

At that moment Mr. Stephen Grey's step was heard on the stairs. He went on at once to the bed-chamber by the direct door, without entering the sitting-room. Mrs. Crane was flushed and feverish with excitement, and the surgeon saw it with surprise; he had left her calm and well at his early visit that morning.

"What have you been doing to yourself?" he exclaimed.

"I feel a little hot," was the answer, given in a half-contrite tone, "it is nothing; it will soon go off. The person I told you of is come, and she—she——" Mrs. Crane paused for a minute and then went on—"she lectured me upon being so imprudent as to travel, and I got angry with her."

Mr. Stephen Grey looked vexed. "So sure as I have a patient going on unusually well, so sure does she herself upset it by some nonsensical folly or other. I will send you a composing draught; and now, my dear, understand me: I positively interdict all talking and excitement whatever for a day or two to come."

"Very well," she answered in a tone of acquiescence. "But let me ask you one thing—can I have the baby baptized?"

"Baptized! why should you wish it baptized? It is not ill."

"It is going away to-day to be nursed."

"Have you heard of a fit person to undertake it?" he rejoined, never supposing but that the baby was to be sent to some one in the neighbourhood. "I wish you would nurse it yourself; better for you, and the child too."

"I told you that circumstances do not permit me to nurse it,"

was her answer; "and I am sure my husband would not be pleased if I did. I wish it to be baptized before it goes away; perhaps some clergyman or curate in the town would kindly come in and do it."

"I can arrange that," said Mr. Stephen. "Only you keep quiet. What is the young giant's name to be?"

"I must think of that," said Mrs. Crane.

However, later in the morning, when church was over, and the Reverend William Lycett, curate of St. Mark's, called to perform the rite, Judith went down to him and said that the sick lady had changed her mind with regard to having it baptized so soon, and was sorry to have troubled him. So Mr. Lycett, with a kindly hope that both lady and baby were going on satisfactorily, went away again. The event had caused quite a commotion in the little town, and its particulars were known from one end of it to the other.

The omnibus, so often referred to, allowed itself half-an-hour to start and jolt over the unpromising two miles of road. When ordered to do so, it would call for any passengers in South Wennock who might be going by it, and it was so ordered to call for Mrs. Smith. At a quarter past six,—for it liked to give itself plenty of time,—it drew up at Mrs. Gould's house in Palace Street, and Mrs. Smith stepped into it with two bundles; one bundle containing the baby, the other the baby's clothes.

It happened that she was the only passenger that Sunday evening; the omnibus, therefore, not having a full load, tore and jolted along to its heart's content, pretty nearly shaking Mrs. Smith to pieces. In vain, when she dared free a hand for a moment, did she hammer at the windows and roof; but her hands had full occupation, the one taking care of the breathing bundle, the other clasping the cushions, the woodwork, anything to steady herself. In vain she shrieked out to the driver that her brains were being shaken out of her, herself battered to atoms; the driver was a phlegmatic man, and rarely paid attention to these complaints of his passengers. He knew, shaken or not, they must go by him, unless they had a private conveyance; and the knowledge made him independent. The consequence of all the speed and jolting on this particular evening was, that the omnibus arrived at Great Wennock Station unusually early, twenty minutes before the up-train would start, and five minutes before the down-train was expected in.

Mrs. Smith, vowing vengeance against the driver and the omnibus, declared she would lay a complaint, and bounced out to do so. But the clerk at the station—and there was only one on duty that Sunday evening, and he a very young man—aggravatingly laughed in Mrs. Smith's face at the account she gave of her bruises, and said the omnibus had nothing to do with him. Mrs. Smith, overflowing with wrath, took herself and her bundles into the first-class waiting-room,

and there sat down. The room opened on one side to the platform, and on the other to the road, lately the scene of Mrs. Smith's unpleasant journey.

Five minutes, and the down-train came steaming in. Some five or six passengers alighted, not more; the English as a nation do not prefer Sundays for making long journeys; and the train went steaming on again. The passengers all dispersed, except one; they belonged to Great Wennock; that one crossed the line when it was clear, and came into the waiting-room.

It was Mr. Carlton, the medical gentleman whom the sick lady had wished to employ. He was of middle height, slender, and looking younger than his years, which may have been seven or eight and twenty; his hair and complexion were fair, his eyes a light blue, his features regular. It was a good-looking face, but singularly impassive, and there was something in the expression of the thin and closely-compressed lips not pleasing to many an eye. Altogether his appearance was that of a gentleman in rather a remarkable degree.

Discerning some one sitting there in the twilight,—for the station generally neglected to light up its waiting-rooms on a Sunday night,—he lifted his hat momentarily, and walked straight across to the door, where he stood gazing down the road. Nothing was to be seen except the waiting omnibus, its horses still steaming.

"Taylor," said Mr. Carlton, as the railway clerk came out whistling, and took a general view outside, having probably nothing else to do, "do you know whether my groom has been here with the carriage?"

"No, sir, not that I have seen; but we only opened the station five minutes ago."

Mr. Carlton retraced his steps indoors, glancing keenly at the middle-aged woman seated there. She paid no attention to him; she was allowing her anger to effervesce. It was too dark for either to discern the features of the other; a loss not felt, as they were strangers. He went again to the door, propped himself against its post, and stood peering down the South Wennock road, softly whistling.

"Dobson," he called out, as the driver of the omnibus came up to look after his patient horses, "did you see my servant anywhere as you came along? I sent him orders to be here to meet the train."

"Naw, sir, I didn't see nothing on him," was Dobson's reply. "Like to take advantage of the 'bus, sir?—it be a-going back empty."

"No, thank you," replied Mr. Carlton, some sarcasm in his tone. "You had the chance of bumping me to a jelly once; I don't intend to give it you a second time."

"That was afore I knowed who you was, sir. I don't bump our

gentry. I takes care of my driving when I've got any o' them inside."

"They may trust you if they will. If my carriage is not here shortly, I shall walk."

Dobson, seeing no chance of a customer, ascended to his seat, whipped up his horses, and set off home; his hat bobbing upwards with his speed, and his omnibus flying behind him.

By this time it wanted ten minutes to seven: the period, as Mrs. Smith had been informed, when she could get her ticket. She deposited the live bundle at the very back of the wide sofa, and went to procure it. Mr. Carlton turned in at the door again, whistling still, when a faint, feeble cry was heard to proceed from the sofa.

It brought him and his whistling to a standstill. He stood looking at the sofa, wondering whether his ears had deceived him. The cry was repeated.

"Why, bless my heart, if I don't believe it is a child!" he exclaimed.

Approaching the sofa, he dived into the wrappings and flannels, and felt something warm and soft. He could not see; the obscurity was too great for that, although a distant lamp from the platform threw its rays partially in. Mr. Carlton drew some wax matches from his pocket, struck one, and held its light over the face of the child. He had rarely in his life seen so small a one, and the little thing began to cry as Mrs. Smith came in.

"So you have woke up, have you!" cried she. "It's an odd thing to me that you could sleep through the doings of that wicked omnibus. Come along, baby; five minutes yet before we get into the train."

"I thought magic must be at work, to hear a human cry from what looked like a packet of clothes," said Mr. Carlton. "I lighted a match to make sure whether it was a child or a rabbit."

"It is as much like a rabbit as a child yet, poor little thing; I never saw such a baby born."

"It is not at its full time," observed Mr. Carlton.

"Full time!" repeated Mrs. Smith, who had by no means recovered the equanimity that had been shaken out of her, and resented the remark as an offence. "Who are you, young man, that you should offer your opinion to me? What do you know of infants, pray?"

"At least as much as you, my good lady," was the answer, given with unruffled equanimity. "I have brought plenty of them into the world."

"Oh, then, you are a doctor, I suppose," she said, somewhat mollified.

"Yes, I am a doctor; and, as a doctor, I will tell you that little specimen of humanity is not fit to travel."

"I don't say it is; but necessity has to do many things without reference to fitness."

"When was it born?"

"Yesterday morning. Sir, have you any influence in this neighbourhood?"

"Why do you ask?" returned Mr. Carlton.

"Because, if you have, I hope you will use it to put down that dangerous omnibus. The way it jolts and rattles over the road is enough to kill any one who's inside of it. I went by it to South Wennock this morning, and that was bad enough, as the other passengers could testify; but in coming back by it this evening I did really think I should have lost my life. Jolting one's head up to the roof, taking one's feet off the floor, jolting one's body against the sides and seat! I shall be sore all over for a week to come; and the more I knocked and called, the faster the sinner drove. And I with this baby to protect all the while."

"It is a shame," replied Mr. Carlton. "What surprises me is, that South Wennock does not rise up against it. There'll be some serious result one of these days, and then it will be altered."

"The serious result has come," wrathfully returned Mrs. Smith. "A young lady, hardly fit to travel in an easy carriage, went in the omnibus to South Wennock last Friday, and the consequence was the birth of this poor little infant."

"Indeed! And what of her?"

"Well, she is going on all right, as it happens; but it might have been just the other way, you know."

Mr. Carlton nodded. "One of the Messrs. Greys' patients, I suppose? Was it young Mrs. Lipscome of the Rise?"

"No, it was not, sir; and who it was don't matter. Whether it was a lady-in-waiting to Queen Victoria or a poor peasant girl, the injury's the same. And much that rascally omnibus cares!"

"Now then! Take seats for the up-train," cried a man, thrusting in his head.

Mrs. Smith gathered her two bundles together, and went out. And Mr. Carlton crossed to the other door, for his ear had caught the sound of carriage wheels in the distance.

CHAPTER IV.

AN ACCIDENT.

DASHING up with the speed of the omnibus came an open carriage, driven by a servant in livery. The man was the same who had been so supercilious to Judith Ford at Mr. Carlton's residence; the carriage, a light, elegant vehicle, was the same spoken of by Mrs. Gould as the "cabrioily."

Mr. Carlton stepped out of the station as it stopped, and peered at his servant, as well as the dusky night would permit him. The man had transgressed against the rules of sobriety once or twice, and his master suspected the delay might have arisen from the same cause now. But he seemed sober enough as he jumped down.

"What were the orders you received, Evan?"

"I'm very sorry to be late, sir; I can't in the least make out how it was," was the deprecating answer. "When I met the omnibus coming back, sir, I'm sure you might have knocked me down with a feather. I know I started in time, and——"

"No lie, Evan," quietly interrupted Mr. Carlton. "You know you did *not* start in time."

He motioned the man round to the other side, ascending himself to the driver's seat. It was not often Mr. Carlton took the reins; perhaps he still doubted his servant's perfect sobriety to-night.

"You have not got your lamps lighted."

"No, sir, I thought they'd not be wanted. And they wouldn't be, neither, but for them clouds obscuring the moon."

Mr. Carlton drove off. Not quite with the reckless speed that characterized the omnibus, but pretty quickly. The light carriage had good springs; those of the omnibus had probably been gone long ago. There was one smooth bit of road about midway between the towns, and they had reached this, and were bowling along, when, without any warning, the horse started violently and fell. Mr. Carlton and his man were both thrown out, and the shafts of the carriage were broken.

It was the work of an instant. One moment spinning along the road; the next, lying on it. Mr. Carlton was the first to rise. He was certainly shaken, and one of his legs seemed not quite free from pain; but there was no material damage done. What had made the horse start he could not imagine; there was nothing to cause it, so far as he could see. Mr. Carlton went to its head and strove to raise it, but it was more than he could accomplish.

"Evan," he called out.

There was no reply. Mr. Carlton turned to look for his man, and found him lying without motion on the ground. Evan appeared to be senseless.

"Well, this is a pretty state of things!" cried the surgeon aloud.

"What's to-do? What's up?" exclaimed a voice in the rear. It came from a peasant woman who was approaching a gate that led to a roadside field. And at that moment the moon came out from behind the clouds, and threw its light upon the scene.

"Are there any men about?" asked Mr. Carlton. "I must have help."

She shook her head. "There's nobody about but me: my husband"—pointing to a hut just within the gate—"is down with fever. Did the horse fall? Why—goodness save us! There's a man lying there!"

"I must have help," repeated Mr. Carlton. "Neither man nor horse can lie here."

The woman stooped over the horse. "I don't think he's much hurt," she said. "Some of those horses are as obstinate as mules after a fall, and *won't* get up till it suits 'em to do it. Maybe one of his legs is sprained. What caused it, sir?"

"That's more than I know," was the surgeon's answer. "He was always sure-footed until to-night. His falling is to me perfectly inexplicable."

The woman seemed to muse. She had left the horse, and was now regarding Evan. The man lay quite still, and she raised herself again.

"I don't like these unaccountable accidents," she observed in a dreamy tone: "these accidents that come, and nobody can tell why. They bode ill luck."

"They bring ill luck, enough, without boding it," returned Mr. Carlton.

"They bode it too," said the woman, with a nod of the head. "Take care, sir, that no ill happens to you in the next few hours or few days."

"What ill should happen to me?" asked Mr. Carlton, smiling at the woman's superstition.

"We can none of us tell beforehand, sir, what the ill hanging over us may be, or from what quarter it will come," was the answer. "Perhaps you were going a journey?—I don't know, sir, of course, or who you may be;—but if you were, I should say halt, and turn aside from the road you were bound for."

"My good woman, I do think you must be out of your mind!" exclaimed Mr. Carlton.

"No, I am not, sir; but perhaps I have observed more, and keener, than most folks. I'm certain—I'm convinced by experience,

that many of these accidents, these hindrances, are only warnings—if we were but wise enough to take them as such. You, now, sir, were on your road to some place——"

"To South Wennock, a mile off," interrupted Mr. Carlton, some satire in his tone.

"South Wennock; so be it, sir. Then what I would say is, was I you I wouldn't go on to South Wennock: I'd rather turn and go back whence I came. This may be sent as a warning to stop your journey there."

But for the untoward and vexatious circumstances around him, the surgeon would have laughed outright. "Why, I live at South Wennock," he exclaimed, raising his head from his man-servant, over whom it had been again bent. "But the question now is, not what luck, good or ill, may be in store for me," he added, turning to the horse, "but where and how I can get assistance. Here's a helpless horse, and there's a helpless man. First of all, can you bring me a little water?"

She went away without a word, and brought back a brown pitcher full of it, and a small cup. Mr. Carlton took them from her.

"And now can you go to the Red Lion at South Wennock, and tell them to send the necessary aid?"

"I'm willing, sir. My husband won't take any harm at being left: though it's mighty ill he is."

"Who attends him?"

"I've had nobody to him as yet. We poor folks can't afford a doctor till things come to the very worst with us, and life's almost on the ebb."

"Very unwise policy," remarked Mr. Carlton. "Well, my good woman, you do this little service for me, and I'll step in as soon as you bring assistance, and see what I can do for your husband."

"Are you a doctor, sir?"

"I am. Let Mrs. Fitch send an easy carriage: and a couple of men had better come with it. But, I think as you do, that my horse is lying there in temper more than in real injury.

"Is *he* hurt, sir, do you think?" she asked, pointing to the man.

"I think he is only stunned. Make the best of your way for this help, there's a good soul. Tell Mrs. Fitch it is for Mr. Carlton."

The woman, strong and sturdy, strode away with a will that Mr. Carlton himself could not have surpassed, and was back again with all requisite aid, in a short time. Mr. Carlton had his horse up then. It appeared to have sprained its leg, but to have received no other damage. Evan was still unconscious. The surgeon snatched a moment to go in and look at the woman's husband, whom he found suffering from low fever. He told her if she would come to his house the following morning, he would give her certain medicines suited for his case.

Great commotion the damaged procession caused when it made its entry into South Wennock; greater commotion still at the dwelling of Mr. Carlton. The horse was led round to the stable and a veterinary surgeon was sent for, and Mr. Carlton himself attended to his man. Evan had recovered consciousness during the journey, and his master found his injuries were only slight.

Mr. Carlton had remembered the value of *appearance* when he took this house,—one of more pretension than a young surgeon need have entered upon. On either side the entrance was a sitting-room: a rather fine staircase led above to a handsome drawing-room, and to large bedrooms. The drawing-room and some of the bedrooms were not furnished; but there was plenty of time for that.

Evan attended to, Mr. Carlton went down to the hall, and turned into the sitting-room on his left hand, generally called the dining-room. It had two windows—the one looking to the front; the other, a large, low, bay window, looking on the garden, at the side of the house. Both windows had the blinds drawn now, and the room was only lighted by a fire. Mr. Carlton gave it a vigorous poke to stir it into a blaze, and rang the bell.

It was answered by a maid-servant, a respectable woman of middle age. This woman, Evan the groom, and a boy, comprised the household. The boy's work was to carry out the medicines, and to stop in the surgery and answer callers at other times.

"I want Ben, Hannah."

"Yes, sir; I'll send him in. You'll take something to eat, won't you, sir?"

"I should like something; I have had nothing since breakfast this morning. What have you in the house?"

"There's cold beef, sir, and——"

"That will do," interrupted Mr. Carlton; "the cold beef. Send Ben here."

Ben made his appearance: the same young gentleman who had been insolent to Judith Ford on the Friday evening. He stood before his master the very picture of humility.

"Any messages or letters for me, Ben?"

"There haven't been any letters, sir," was Ben's answer. "Two or three folks have been in to see you, but they went away again when they found you were out. And there came a message yesterday from Captain Chesney, sir, and another from him this morning. He was worse, the black man said, and in a dreadful way at your being away; and he told the man to say, that if you weren't with him to-day, he should call in Mr. Grey."

"He may call in the deuce if he likes," was Mr. Carlton's answer, spoken in momentary irritation. "Is that all, Ben?"

"It's all, sir."

Ben might have said with more correctness, all that he remembered. He withdrew, and Mr. Carlton stood a moment in thought. Then he went to the hall and caught up his hat, just as Hannah was coming from the kitchen with a tray in her hand. She looked surprised to see her master going out, thinking he was waiting to take the refreshment.

"When I come back," he said to her. "You can have it ready for me."

He took his way to the Rise, intending to pay a visit to the gentleman who had sent the irritable messages, Captain Chesney. Some doctors might not have been so ready to go off at an inconvenience to a patient whom they knew perfectly well to be in no sort of danger: Mr. Carlton himself would certainly not, for his disposition was more haughty than complaisant; but he was swayed by a different motive from any connected with his profession.

About three months previously, Captain Chesney, a post-captain on half-pay, had settled at South Wennock, removing to it from the neighbourhood of Plymouth. The house he took was called Cedar Lodge, a small white villa, standing back from the high-road amidst a wilderness of a garden. Not that it deserved the name, "wilderness," from being badly kept, but because of the thick shrubs and trees that crowded it. It was excellently kept; for the old naval captain was a precise man, and would insist on having things neat and nice about him, however short the money might run that kept them so. Like many another naval captain, his means were at all times terribly low.

The captain had three daughters, Jane, Laura, and Lucy. There was a wide difference in their ages: as is frequently the case when the father of a family serves his country, whether by sea or by land, and his absences from home are of long duration. But there is no time to notice these young ladies at present; their turn will come by-and-by.

Labouring under frequent attacks of gout, Captain Chesney's naturally hot temper had grown irritable and more irritable. Gout perhaps was the chief cause: certainly the irritability was much more marked when the gout was upon him. Accident had led to his calling in Mr. Carlton. When the captain first arrived at South Wennock, he was suffering, and he sent out his black servant, Pompey, a devoted man who had been with him for years, to "bring back a doctor." Pompey, a stranger to the place, made his inquiries and arrived at the house of Mr. Grey. Mr. Grey and Mr. Stephen were both out; but their assistant promised Pompey that one of them should attend before the day closed; and it was then late in the afternoon. Pompey went back with the message, and it put the captain into one of his fits of irritation. A doctor he wanted at

once, and a doctor he'd have: and Pompey was ordered out again to find another. He went direct to Mr. Carlton's, having noticed the plate upon the door in returning from Mr. Grey's: "Mr. Lewis Carlton, Consulting Surgeon." Mr. Carlton was at home, and from that hour to this had attended Captain Chesney. The captain during the winter had had attack after attack, and Mr. Carlton had been in the house most days; had become, so to say, intimate with the family.

Mr. Carlton proceeded up the Rise. Captain Chesney's house was on the right, about half-way up the hill. Opening the gate, a winding path between the thick trees took him to the house door; and it was only through that path that a glimpse of the road could be caught from the lower windows. Before those windows was a sloping green lawn, to which they opened; and a flower garden lay on the side of the house. It was a pretty place, though small; in every way, excepting size, fitted for the abode of a gentleman.

Mr. Carlton glanced at the sitting-room windows, and saw a faint glimmer of fire. But a bright light burnt in the room above, the chamber of Captain Chesney.

"Not home from church yet," murmured Mr. Carlton to himself, as he rang the bell. "Miss Chesney generally goes to that late one at the other end of the town. I wonder if—all—are gone?"

The honest black face of Pompey shone with delight when he saw who was the visitor. "Massa had been talking, only then, of sending him off for the other doctor, Mr. Grey," he whispered; and Mr. Carlton, with a haughty throw-back of his own head as he heard it, —for, somewhat curious to say, this irritation on the part of his patient tended to render *him* irritable,—stepped upstairs to the captain's room.

The captain was in bed. Mr. Carlton had just brought him through one of his worst attacks of gout, and he was really progressing towards convalescence as fast as he possibly could. There was no need whatever for Mr. Carlton or any other doctor to visit him; but it was always during the period of recovery that Captain Chesney was most impatient and irritable. He was a short man, as are most sailors, with a pair of brilliant brown eyes, overhanging grey eyebrows, and grey hair. The daughter who was sitting with him, Laura Chesney, and whom he despatched from the room when he heard the surgeon's step, had just such eyes, as brilliant and as beautiful.

Mr. Carlton took his seat between the bed and the fire, facing Captain Chesney: and he waited until that gentleman's anger should be over, before he proceeded to question his patient professionally.

"I could not help myself, Captain Chesney," he quietly said, when there was a lull in the storm; and it may be remarked that in the

presence of the captain, Mr. Carlton retained his own suavity unruffled, however provoking the captain's tongue might be. "I received a telegraphic message from my father, desiring me to go to town without a moment's delay, if I wished to see him alive. The hasty note I sent to you explained this."

"And I might have died!" growled the captain.

"Pardon me, sir. Far from dying, I knew you were not in the least danger. Had you been so in ever so slight a degree, I should have requested one of the Messrs. Grey to attend you for me."

"Had you not come in to-night, I should have sent for them myself," retorted the captain. "It's monstrous to suppose I am to lie here in this pain with no doctor to come near me."

"But, Captain Chesney, I feel sure the pain is nothing like what it has been. Have you not been up to-day?"

"No, I have not been up. And I don't choose to get up," added the irritable captain.

"Well, we will have you up to-morrow, and you will be all the better for it," said the surgeon soothingly.

"Ugh!" grunted the captain. "Did you find your father dead?"

"No. I am glad to say I found him a trifle better than he had been when they telegraphed for me. But his life, I think, cannot be much prolonged. The obligation to attend his summons promptly, to see him, if possible, before death, lay urgently upon me, Captain Chesney; for he and I had been at variance," continued Mr. Carlton, vouchsafing a piece of confidence into which he was rarely betrayed.

It was nothing to Captain Chesney. His medical attendant was his medical attendant, and nothing else; none less likely than the haughty old man to make of him even a temporary friend.

"He has not been a good father to me," resumed the surgeon, looking dreamily into the fire. "Anything but that. And I lost my mother when I was an infant. But for that loss I might be different from what I am."

"Men in this life are mostly what their own actions make them, sir; without reference to their father and mother," returned the captain in a hard tone.

"Ah," said Mr. Carlton. "But I meant with regard to happiness. You don't know what my childhood and youth were, without my mother. Had she lived, it would have been so different."

"Is your father a poor man?" asked the captain, taking a momentary interest in the question.

"Oh dear no. He is a rich one. And I"—Mr. Carlton suddenly laid pointed emphasis on the words—"am his only son, his only child."

"I think that physic ought to be changed."

The remark recalled Mr. Carlton to the present. He stood up,

reached the medicine-bottle pointed to by Captain Chesney, and was the composed professional attendant again. A very few minutes, and the visit ceased.

As Mr. Carlton left the chamber, the captain caught hold of the silken ribbon tied to his bedstead, that communicated with the bell-rope, and rang a peal loud enough to awaken the seven sleepers. It was for Pompey to show the doctor out; and Pompey generally was favoured with this sort of peal.

Mr. Carlton closed the bedroom door, stepped along the corridor, and met a girl, young and beautiful, who appeared at the door of another room. It was Laura Chesney, and her luminous dark eyes were raised to Mr. Carlton as he took her hand, and then were dropped behind the dark lashes which closed on her hot cheek.

A hot cheek then; a cheek like a red, red rose. That *his* presence called those blushes up, none could doubt; and in Mr. Carlton's low tones, as he addressed her, there was a tenderness which told its own tale. Never man loved woman more passionately than he, the surgeon, had learned to love Laura Chesney.

"Oh, Laura! I did not expect this. I thought you were out."

"No. Jane and Lucy went to church, but I stayed with papa. When did you return?" she softly whispered.

"To-night only. Laura!" he continued, his tone one of wild fervour, "to meet you thus, unlooked-for, seems like a sudden glimpse of heaven."

One lingering pressure of the hands, and then Mr. Carlton was on his way down again, for Pompey had appeared on the scene. Laura listened for the closing of the hall-door; for the last echoes of the footfalls on the gravel-path, footfalls that for her ear were as the very sweetest music; and when they had died away to silence, she gave a sigh, born of intense emotion, and stepped on to her father's room.

Just as Mr. Carlton had gone through the gate, two ladies came up to it—or, rather, a lady and a little girl. He was passing them with merely a word of salutation, a lift of the hat, when the lady stopped, and addressed him in low and gentle tones.

"You are back then, Mr. Carlton. Have you seen papa?"

"I have been paying him a visit now, Miss Chesney. He is considerably better. The pain has not gone, but I am sure it is nothing to what it was, even when I left. A day or two, and he will, I hope, be downstairs again."

The little girl came round to him with a dancing step. "Mr. Carlton, I want you to get papa well soon. He has promised to take me out for a whole day's holiday as soon as he is well."

"Very well, Miss Lucy," answered the surgeon in a merry tone. "I'll get him well with all speed, for the sake of your whole day's holiday. Good night, young lady; good night, Miss Chesney."

He held the gate open for them to pass through, lifted his hat again, closed the gate after them, and went on down the road. The moon had grown brilliant, and he glanced up at it. Not in reality to look at it, for he had plunged into deep thought. The few words he had spoken to Captain Chesney had brought vividly before him his past life; its good and ill doings, its discomforts, its recklessness, its sins. His father, who was in the same profession as himself, a surgeon, in large practice in a populous but not desirable quarter of London, lying eastward, had been rather given to sins and recklessness himself, and no good example had ever been placed before the boy, Lewis. Had his mother lived, as he remarked to Captain Chesney, things would have been widely different. Allowed to have his own way in childhood, allowed to have it in youth and in early manhood, insomuch as that no control or supervision was exercised over him, no fatherly guidance extended to him, it was little wonder that he fell into various dangers and difficulties; and, as a sequence, into displeasure with his father. When an array of debts was brought home to stare old Mr. Carlton in the face, he flew into a terrible passion, and swore that he would not pay them. A half-peace was patched up after a while; the debts were settled, and Mr. Carlton the younger established himself at South Wennock: but the father and son still continued much at variance, no cordiality existing between them. Now the thing was altered. Mr. Carlton senior on a bed of sickness was quite a different man from Mr. Carlton in rude health, and he had allowed himself to be fully reconciled to his son. He had shown him his will, in which he, Lewis, was named sole heir; and he had hinted at the good round sum laid by in bank securities. And Mr. Carlton stepped on now, dreaming a glowing dream; a dream that had become the one wild hope of his life—a marriage with Laura Chesney.

His supper was laid ready when he reached home. Before sitting down to it, he drew three or four letters from his pocket, took them from the envelopes, and began to look over them as if for the purpose of sorting.

"I must keep that one," he said to himself, as he glanced down the writing, and replaced it in its envelope; "these I suppose may be burnt. Stay, though—I'll have my supper first."

He sat down before the tray and cut himself some meat. Barely had he begun to eat it, when Ben came in with a face of contrition, holding a note in his hand.

"What now, boy?" asked Mr. Carlton.

"I am sorry I forgot it, sir, when you asked me. I put it in the letter-rack in the surgery, and it slipped my memory. It was brought here, sir, the night that you went away."

Mr. Carlton, putting down his knife and fork, opened the note and

ran his eyes over its contents. Ben, who had gone away, heard his master shouting to him.

"Come back, sir! Who brought this?"

Ben could not tell who brought it: except that it was a woman with a big bonnet on; a bonnet as big as a house.

Mr. Carlton read the note again, read it attentively. Then he rose, hastily sorted the letters on the table, putting aside the one which he wished to preserve, and throwing the rest indiscriminately into the fire. "I'll take this down at once and then it will be safe," he said to himself, alluding to the letter he had preserved. "If I don't keep it as a proof, the old man, when he gets well, may be for saying that he never wrote it."

The "old man" thus somewhat irreverently alluded to, was Mr. Carlton's father. Mr. Carlton carried the letter downstairs to a private safe and locked it up. When he returned to the sitting-room he put his hand into his pocket for the note just brought to him by his servant-boy, and could not find it. It was not in any of his pockets, it was not on the table: and Mr. Carlton came to the conclusion that he had burnt it with the rest.

"How stupid I am!" he exclaimed. "What was the number, now? Thirteen, I think. Thirteen, Palace Street. Yes, that was it."

He passed into the hall without further delay, put on his hat, and left the house. Hannah heard him, and went into the parlour to remove the tray.

"I never saw such patients as his!" she exclaimed wrathfully, when she found her master's supper had been interrupted. "They can't even let him get his meals in peace."

CHAPTER V.

MR. CARLTON'S VISIT.

THE moon shone brightly on the long street of South Wennock, as Mr. Carlton the surgeon stepped along it with a fleet foot. He was on his way to the house in Palace Street, number thirteen.

The widow herself came to the door in answer to his ring. She dropped a curtsey when she saw who stood there.

"Is this Mrs. Gould's?"

"Yes, sir; if you please, sir. I am Mrs. Gould, sir."

"I have just opened a note, on my return from London; one that was left at my house a day or two ago; requesting me to call here to see a patient," said Mr. Carlton. "A Mrs.—Mrs.——"

"Mrs. Crane, sir," said the widow, supplying the name for which

Mr. Carlton appeared at fault. "It's all happily over, sir, and she is doing well."

Mr. Carlton stared at her as if he were thunderstruck. "Over!" he repeated. "Happily over! Why she—I understood—if I read her note aright—did not expect it for two months to come!"

"No more she didn't, sir, and it was all that omnibus's doings. It pretty near shook the life out of her."

"Omnibus!" he returned, seeming completely at sea. "What omnibus? what are you talking of?"

"Perhaps you don't know the circumstances yet, sir," returned the widow. "The lady arrived here from London, sir, a stranger, and was recommended by Mrs. Fitch to my apartments. So young, she looked quite a girl——"

"But about her illness?" interposed Mr. Carlton, whose time was being wasted.

"I was coming to it, sir. Afore she had well done her tea that same evening, she grew ill: the omnibus had shook her frightfully, she said—and you know what that omnibus is yourself, sir. Instead of getting better, she got worse, and early the next morning the baby was born. Such a mite of a baby, sir!" added Mrs. Gould in a confidential tone. "I have seen many a wax-doll bigger. Some person came down from London this morning and took it away."

A conviction entered the surgeon's mind that the mite of a baby he had seen at Great Wennock station, that evening, must be the one in question. "Who attended?" he inquired.

"Mr. Stephen Grey. But he only attended for you, sir, I believe, as the lady wished to have you. She had been recommended to you."

"Recommended to me!"

"Well, yes, sir; we understood her to say so. She'll explain to you, herself, no doubt. Of course we can't but think the circumstances altogether are somewhat strange."

"Is she doing well?"

"Couldn't be doing better. Will you walk up, sir?"

The colloquy had taken place at the open door; the widow standing inside, Mr. Carlton out. He made a movement to enter, but stopped in hesitation.

"It is late to disturb her to-night. She may be asleep."

"She is not asleep, sir. Leastways she wasn't five minutes ago, when I went up to call Pepperfly down to her supper, which she's now having with me in the kitchen. I dare say she'd like you to go up, sir, and to know that you are back again."

He went in, and laid his hat on the stand that stood in the passage. Mrs. Gould ran briskly towards the kitchen.

"Just one moment, sir, while I get a light, for there's none up-

stairs," she said, in a tone of apology for leaving him waiting. "When the nurse came down, Mrs. Crane sent the candle away by her, saying she'd rather be without it."

Passing the parlour door and the room behind it—which room was a bed-chamber, and Mrs. Gould took the opportunity of sleeping in it when her permanent lodger was absent—she tripped into the kitchen, a very small apartment built out at the back, seized the candle on the table, by the light of which Mrs. Pepperfly was eating her supper, unceremoniously left that lady in the dark, and was back in an instant to marshal Mr. Carlton up the stairs. Arrived at the door of the sitting-room, he took the light from her hand.

"That will do, thank you, Mrs. Gould," he said, sinking his voice to a whisper. "I had better go in alone. She may have dropped asleep."

Mrs. Gould was nothing loth to be dismissed. She had been disturbed at her supper, and was glad to return to it. In consequence of her having gone to church that evening, the meal was being taken later than usual. She closed the door on Mr. Carlton, leaving him alone.

He passed through the sitting-room, softly opened the door of the bed-chamber and entered it, shading the light with his hand. The chamber was quite still, and he believed Mrs. Crane to be alone. In point of fact, however, Judith was sitting at the extreme end of it, behind the bed-curtains, which were drawn round that side of the bed and at the foot. Quiet as his movements were, they awoke Mrs. Crane, who had fallen into a doze, as she looked round with a start, and raised her head—as we are all apt to do when suddenly awakened, especially in illness.

Mr. Carlton put down the light on a table by the door, approached the bed, and addressed her. But ere he had said many words or she had scarcely responded, a sound, as of a rustling movement on the other side of the bed, caught his ear.

"What is that?" he abruptly called out.

"What is what?" repeated the invalid, whose ears had not been as quick as his own.

Mr. Carlton stepped round the bed. "Is any one here?" he asked.

There appeared to be no one, for the question elicited neither sound nor answer. Sufficient light came from the candle to enable him to discern a second door on that side. He drew it open: it was pushed to, but not latched, and the moonlight streamed full upon the landing from the staircase window. But Mr. Carlton could neither see nor hear any one, and he came to the conclusion that he had been mistaken.

"I thought I heard some one in the room," he said, in a tone of apology, as he returned to the chamber.

"Indeed there is no one here," said the sick lady. "The nurse went down to her supper. It must have been in the next house: we hear the noises there nearly as plainly as though they were in this."

"That was it then," said Mr. Carlton.

You will be at no loss, however, to understand that the noise had been caused by Judith. Finding it was Mr. Carlton who had entered, and not deeming it right to make a third at an interview between a doctor and his patient, she had hastened to escape through the half-opened door, near to which she was sitting. Her slippers were entirely of list--for Judith Ford had been furnished with all the requisites for a sick-room in her last place—and the stairs were carpeted, and she ran swiftly and silently down them, unconscious of the commotion she had so innocently caused. Mrs. Crane had not known she was there: in fact, it was only a minute or two before that Judith had entered. She, Judith, made her way to the kitchen, where Mrs. Gould and the nurse were in full enjoyment of cold boiled bacon and pickled onions, by the light of a fresh candle.

"Where on earth did you spring from?" exclaimed the widow.

"From upstairs," replied Judith.

"I never heard you come in. I thought you were keeping house next door, while your sister had her Sunday evening out."

"So I was, but Margaret has come home now, and I just stepped in to see if I could do anything. I saw you two were at supper as I passed the window, and didn't disturb you. Mrs. Crane was asleep, however, when I got upstairs, and Mr. Carlton has come in now."

"I say, Judith," cried the widow eagerly, "did Mr. Carlton say anything to you about the accident?"

"Mr. Carlton did not say anything to me at all. He did not see me. As soon as I knew who had come in, I stole away quietly. What accident?"

"There has been a shocking accident to-night, to him and his carriage. They were talking about it in the bar at the Cross Keys, when I went for our supper-beer."

"An accident to Mr. Carlton?"

Mrs. Gould nodded. She had just taken a large onion in her mouth, and it was not convenient to speak immediately.

"It happened as he was coming from Great Wennock, where his servant had took his carriage to meet him at the train," she presently resumed. "The carriage was overturned and smashed to pieces, and his horse and servant were both killed."

"How dreadful!" involuntarily spoke Judith.

"I was just telling Mrs. Pepperfly of it, when the ring came to the door, and I assure you, Judy, when I opened it and saw Mr. Carlton himself standing there, it did give me a turn. Me and Mrs.

Pepperfly had been wondering whether he wasn't killed too—for nobody seemed to know how it was with him at the Cross Keys—and there stood he! *I* couldn't make bold to ask questions, for he has the character of being one of those proud men that won't brook them. At any rate, he's not dead. I say, Mrs. Pepperfly, don't you think you ought to be upstairs while he's there?"

Mrs. Pepperfly, fond of her supper at least in an equal degree with the widow, resented the suggestion, and held up her plate, in a defiant spirit, for more bacon.

"If he wants me, he can ring for me," was her answer, curtly delivered. "How is your face to-night, Judith?"

"Well, it has been very painful all the evening. I think I shall go home and get to bed," continued Judith. "It may become easier there."

She did not linger, but bade them good night, and hastened away. She had suffered much from toothache or faceache the last day or two. Mrs. Pepperfly and the widow sat on at their supper, until disturbed by the departure of Mr. Carlton. He had not remained long.

"She'll do well, sir?" said Mrs. Gould, as she opened the street-door.

"Very well indeed; quite well," replied Mr. Carlton. "Good night."

Of course tales never lose by carrying, especially if they are bad ones; and that you all know. The current report of the accident in South Wennock that night was precisely the one mentioned by Mrs. Gould—that Mr. Carlton's carriage was smashed to pieces, and his horse and man were killed. On the following morning, however, things were found to be looking a little brighter; the groom, under his master's treatment, was progressing quickly towards recovery, the horse's sprain was going on well, and the carriage had gone to the coachmaker's to be repaired.

Mr. Carlton had to make his visits on foot that day. Towards the middle of it, in passing through High Street, he encountered Mr. Stephen Grey. The two had never met professionally, but they knew each other sufficiently well to nod in passing. Mr. John Grey had more than once been in attendance in conjunction with Mr. Carlton, but it happened that Mr. Stephen had not. Both stopped simultaneously now.

As Mr. Stephen Grey had remarked casually to Judith the previous Friday, there was plenty of room for Mr. Carlton in South Wennock as well as for themselves. Indeed, the death of their brother Robert, combined with the increasing size of the place, had caused the practice to be more than John and Stephen Grey and their assistant could manage, therefore they felt not a shade of jealousy of the new surgeon, who had come and set up amidst them. Honourable, fair-

dealing, right-minded men were the brothers Grey, altogether above rankling spite and petty meannesses.

Mr. Stephen Grey had halted to speak of Mrs. Crane. He had been happy to attend her, he said, and would now resign her into the hands of Mr. Carlton.

"She is doing quite well," remarked Mr. Carlton.

"Quite so," said Mr. Stephen Grey, who had taken the remark as a question. "I have not long come from her. If you will step down there with me now, I will explain matters, and——"

"Would you oblige me by not giving up charge until to-night or to-morrow morning?" interrupted Mr. Carlton. "What with the confusion caused by last night's accident, and the patients who have grown impatient at my absence, and are exacting double attention, I am so busy to-day that I don't know which way to turn. Before I take Mrs.—Mrs.—— What's the name?"

"Crane."

"Mrs. Crane. It is not a difficult name to remember, and yet it seems to slip from me. Before I take her from your hands I should wish to meet you there, just for explanation, and I have really not time for it now. When I reached home last night and read the note she had sent to me on Friday last, I called, but it was late; she seemed drowsy, and I did not undertake the case. Either to-night or to-morrow morning, Mr. Grey, I shall have the pleasure of meeting you."

"Whichever may be most convenient to you," returned Mr. Stephen. "It's quite the same to me."

"To-night, then, at seven," said Mr. Carlton. "If I find that I cannot by any possibility get there"—he paused in consideration—"why then, it must be left until to-morrow morning, at ten. But I hope I shall be there this evening. She seems young, this lady."

"Quite young. She says she's two-and-twenty, but I should not have thought her so much. How did you manage to meet with that unpleasant accident?"

"I don't know any more than you know, who were not present. I fancied the horse shied: but it all happened so swiftly I could not be sure. If he did shy, it was very slightly, and I saw nothing that could have induced it; but why he should have fallen, or over what, is inexplicable. It was on that smooth bit of road; the only smooth bit there is, half-way between here and Great Wennock. Evan is doing well, and as to the horse, he is very slightly injured."

"The report in the town was, that you were all done for, all killed together; you, the groom, horse, phaeton, and all."

Mr. Carlton laughed. It was difficult to resist the good-humour of Mr. Stephen Grey. And so they parted, each walking a different way.

CHAPTER VI.

WAS THE HOUSE HAUNTED?

At seven precisely that evening Stephen Grey went to Mrs. Crane's, to wait for Mr. Carlton. Mrs. Crane was flushed, and appeared to be a little feverish.

"There has been too much chattering going on," he observed to Judith, who was sitting in the front room.

"She will talk, sir," answered Judith. "Feeling well, as she does, I suppose it's natural."

"But not expedient," he returned. "Where's the nurse?"

"She was here not two minutes before you came in, sir. Perhaps she's gone down for something."

Mr. Stephen rang the bell, and the nurse was heard puffing up in answer. She was sure to puff when going upstairs, however slow her pace might be.

"Mrs. Pepperfly, how's this? You have allowed your charge to talk too much."

"Well, sir, and she will talk," was Mrs. Pepperfly's answer, almost the same as that given by Judith. "She's all right, sir; a little feverish maybe to-night; but it's nothing: she's too young and healthy for harm to come nigh her through a bit of talking."

"I'll not have her talk until she is stronger," said Mr. Stephen. "You must stop it. I must send her in a composing draught now, as I did last night."

Mr. Stephen Grey gave Mr. Carlton more grace than most busy medical gentlemen would have given—waiting for him until a quarter past seven. Then he left. After his departure, Judith went home; her face was paining her very much; and Mrs. Pepperfly remained on guard. Scarcely had Judith gone when Mrs. Crane called to her from the next room.

"Judith. Come here, Judith. I want you."

"Now, mum, you are not to talk," cried Mrs. Pepperfly, hastening in. "Mr. Stephen have been a-blowing me up like anything, for suffering it. He as good as said it was my fault."

Mrs. Crane laughed; laughed out merrily, the nurse's tones were so resentfully serious. "Oh, well, I will be good," she said. "But I do want to speak to Judith for a minute. Is she not there?"

"No, mum, she's gone home—and Mr. Stephen had better have blown her up instead of me; for I'm sure it's to her you talk. Settle yourself just for a wink or two of sleep, there's a dear lady."

About eight o'clock the nurse was called down to supper. It was

her usual hour for taking it, and she had been exceedingly wrathful the previous evening at its having been delayed; the wrath perhaps causing the widow to get it ready punctually to-night. Almost immediately afterwards Mr. Carlton arrived in a hot heat. He had walked from the Rise, he said to Mrs. Gould, who opened the door to him, and was sorry Mr. Stephen Grey had gone. The truth was, Mr. Carlton need not have missed his appointment, but he had lingered at Captain Chesney's. In Laura's society time seemed to fly on wings. Mrs. Gould attended him upstairs, for he said he would see the patient, and then she went down again.

Mr. Carlton had not been talking with the invalid many minutes when a ring at the bell was heard, and some one ascended the stairs. The surgeon went into the sitting-room, thinking it might possibly be Mr. Stephen Grey. It was, however, Mrs. Pepperfly.

"It's the draught, please, sir," said she.

"Draught?" he repeated, taking a small bottle from her hand. "What draught? One that Mr. Stephen Grey has sent in?"

"Yes, sir, the sleeping draught. He said she was excited to-night through talking, and must take one."

Mr. Carlton undid the paper, took out the cork, and smelt it. "How strongly it smells of oil of almonds!" he exclaimed.

"Do it, sir?"

"Do it! why, can't you smell it yourself?" he returned. And once more taking out the cork, which he had replaced, he held the phial towards her.

"Yes, sir; but I have a cold. And when I does have a cold upon me, my nose ain't worth a rush."

The surgeon was still occupied with the draught, smelling it. Then he tasted it, just putting his finger to the liquid, and that to his tongue.

"Extraordinary!" he remarked in an undertone. "Why should Grey be giving her this? Here, take possession of it, nurse," he added. "It is to be given the last thing."

He returned to the bedroom as he spoke, and Mrs. Pepperfly placed the phial on the cheffonier, where other medicine-bottles were arrayed. Then she put her head inside the bed-chamber. Mr. Carlton was standing talking to the sick lady.

"Do you want anything, please, ma'am?"

"Nothing at present," replied Mrs. Crane. "You can go down."

The nurse did as she was bid, and not long afterwards Mr. Carlton said good night to Mrs. Crane, and passed through the sitting-room to take his departure. As he went out on to the landing to descend, he saw what he thought was a face, leaning against the wall by the bedroom door and staring at him; a man's face with thick black whiskers; a strange face, looking stern, white, and cold in the

moonlight. Mr. Carlton was of remarkably strong nerve—a bold, fearless man; but the impression this made upon him was so great, that for once in his life he was startled.

"Who and what are you?" he whispered, his voice insensibly assuming a tone of awe, of terror: for in good truth that face did not look like any earthly one that Mr. Carlton had ever in his life seen.

There was no reply; there was neither movement nor sound. Uncertain whether the moonlight was not playing him some fantastic trick, the surgeon strode back to the sitting-room, brought out the solitary candle and threw its rays around.

Not a soul was there; neither man nor woman, neither ghost nor spirit. And yet Mr. Carlton felt certain that a face *had* been there. An unaccountable feeling, vague superstition mixed with absolute fear, came over him as he stood there; and yet I say he was by nature a fearless man, and perhaps this was the first time in his remembrance that such terror had assailed him. He threw the light around the landing; he threw it down the stairs; there was no upper story; but nothing was to be seen, and all was silent. Still carrying the light, he went into the bedroom by the door on the landing and cast its rays there. Mrs. Crane glanced up from the bed in surprise.

"Were you looking for anything?" she asked.

"Nothing particular. Good night."

He went straight on to the sitting-room through the intervening door, still glancing around into every nook and corner, and put the candle back on the mantelpiece whence he had taken it—for Mrs. Crane rather liked lying in the dark. Then he wiped his hot face and descended the stairs, willing to persuade himself that he had been mistaken.

"I think I must be a fool," he muttered. "What has come over me to-night? Is the house haunted?"

Soon, all too soon, ere ten o'clock had struck, the house *was* haunted. Haunted by a presence that had no business there—the presence of Death.

CHAPTER VII.

THE COMPOSING DRAUGHT.

It was Mrs. Gould who ran to open the door for Mr. Carlton on his departure. He spoke with her a minute or two, and then went out, she returning to the kitchen and the society of Mrs. Pepperfly.

It may strike the reader that all these details have been given at

some length; but, as was afterwards found, the smallest event of that ill-starred night bore its own future significance.

Mrs. Gould and the nurse resumed their gossip, and were plunged full tide in it, the former leaning back in her chair at her ease before the supper-table, on which stood a suspicious-looking green bottle, its contents white, of which both ladies, if the truth may be told, had partaken. The latter rose from her seat and was bending over the fire, stirring something in a saucepan, when there came a loud, sharp rap at the kitchen window. Both started and screamed: the widow clapped her glass and teaspoon down on the table, and Mrs. Pepperfly nearly dropped the candle into the saucepan. Although they knew, had they taken a moment for reflection, that the knock came from Judith, who frequently took that way of making her visit known on coming in from the other house, it considerably startled them.

Judith it was. And she laughed at them as she stepped inside the passage from the yard, and entered the kitchen.

"What a simpleton you be, Judy, to come frightening folks in that fashion!" cried the widow irascibly. "One would think you were a child. Can't you come into the house quiet and decent?"

"It was as good as a play to see the start you two gave," cried Judith. "My face is bad, and I am going to bed," she added, changing her tone; "but I thought I'd step in first and see if I could do anything more for Mrs. Crane. I suppose she's not asleep?"

"She's not asleep yet, for Mr. Carlton's but just gone. You can go up and ask her."

It was Nurse Pepperfly who spoke: the widow was still resenting her fright. Mrs. Pepperfly regarded Judith with complaisance, for she took off her hands a great deal of care and trouble, which must otherwise have fallen to the nurse's exclusive share.

Judith proceeded upstairs. She felt very tired, for she had been up all Friday and Saturday nights, and though she had gone to bed on Sunday night, she had slept very little, owing to the pain in her face. She was subject to this pain, feeling it whenever she took the slightest cold.

"Is that you, Judith?" cried Mrs. Crane. "How is your face-ache now?"

"The pain's getting easier, ma'am," was Judith's answer. "Mr. Stephen Grey said it would, now the swelling had come on. I stepped in to ask whether I can do anything more for you to-night?"

"No, thank you; there's nothing more to be done. I suppose the nurse won't be long before she brings up the gruel. You can tell her I am ready for it as you go down. You will be glad to get to bed, Judith."

"Well, ma'am, I shall, and that's the truth. To lie tossing about in pain, as I did last night, tires one more than sitting up."

"And the two previous nights you were sitting up. I don't forget it, Judith, if you do."

"Oh, ma'am, that's nothing. It s a mercy that you have not required more sitting up than that. Many do require it."

"I!" returned Mrs. Crane in hearty tones. "I don't believe I required it at all. I am as well as I possibly can be. Mr. Carlton has just said so. I should like to get up to-morrow, Judith."

Judith shook her head, and said something about the danger of being "too venturesome." "You'll get about all the surer, ma'am, for being quiet for another day or two."

At that moment, in came Mrs. Pepperfly; a flaring candle in one hand, a tray with a basin of gruel in the other. Judith, generally suspicious of Mrs. Pepperfly, went up and glanced attentively into the basin, lest that lady should have seasoned it with a few drops of tallow in the ascent. The light shone full on Judith's swollen face, and Mrs. Crane burst into laughter.

"I can't help it," she said, as they turned to her in amazement. "It is your face that I am laughing at, Judith. It looks like a full moon; your cheeks are quite round."

"Oh, ma'am, I don't mind the look, so that I am easy. The swelling will soon go down again."

Judith wished her good night and departed. Nurse Pepperfly arranged the basin of gruel on the bed, and stood by while it was taken.

"And now for my composing draught," said Mrs. Crane.

"I can't give you that yet, mum," dissented the nurse. "The idea of your taking it right upon the gruel!"

"I don't suppose it would hurt me. It has come, hasn't it?"

"It came while Mr. Carlton was here, mum. It was that what I brought up, and Mr. Carlton tasted of it. Just like them doctors! they are sure to taste each other's medicines."

"Mr. Carlton's going to meet Mr. Stephen Grey here at ten o'clock to-morrow," she observed. "And then I shall be under his charge exclusively."

"I heered some'at of it, mum," was Mrs. Pepperfly's answer.

She turned to busy herself about the room, making arrangements for the night with Mrs. Gould, who came up to assist her. By the aid of blankets, a bed had been extemporized for herself on the sofa in the sitting-room, and there she slept, the door between the two rooms being left open that the patient might be still under her supervision. Mrs. Pepperfly had really been on her good behaviour hitherto; afraid, perhaps, to run counter to the strict orders given to her on entering by Mr. Stephen Grey.

About half-past nine or a quarter to ten, when Mrs. Crane had been made comfortable for the night, the nurse pronounced it time for the composing draught.

"Just light me to get it, will you?" she asked of Mrs. Gould, who happened to have the candle in her hand. And they went into the sitting-room.

The bottle was on the cheffonier where the nurse herself had placed it. She took it to the side of the bed.

"Ready, mum?"

"Quite," said Mrs. Crane.

She, the nurse, poured the contents into a large wine-glass, and Mrs. Crane drank them down, but not before she had made some remark about cherry pie.

"How it smells!" said Mrs. Gould in a whisper, as she stood by with the candle.

"Mr. Carlton said it did," was the nurse's answering whisper. "Doctors' noses be so quick."

"It don't want much quickness to smell this," sniffed the landlady.

"It was just at the moment that I'd took my drop short, and you know——"

An awful cry; bringing the nurse's confession to a standstill; an awful cry of alarm and agony. But whether it came from Mrs. Crane on the bed, or Mrs. Gould by her side, or from both, Nurse Pepperfly was too much startled to know.

Oh, then was commotion in the chamber! What was amiss with their patient? Was it a fainting-fit?—was it a convulsion?—or was it death? Was it the decree of God that was taking her from the world? or had some fatal drug been given to her in error?

There is no mistaking death by those accustomed to the sight; and Mrs. Pepperfly, more thoroughly sobered in brain than she often was, wrung her hands wildly.

"It's death!" she exclaimed to the landlady. "As sure as you and me's standing upright here, it's death, and she is gone! That physic must have been poisoned; and perhaps they'll try us both for giving it to her, and hang us after it."

With a hullabaloo that might have been heard over the way, Mrs. Gould tore down the stairs. She was almost out of her senses just then, frightened out of them with consternation and terror. Partly at what had just happened, partly at the nurse's remark as to possible consequences to themselves, was she terrified. She burst out at the front door, left it open, and ran panting up the street, some confused notion in her mind of fetching Mr. Grey. Before she gained his house, however, she encountered Mr. Carlton.

Without a word of explanation, for she was too breathless and bewildered to give it, she seized his arm, turned to run back again, and to pull him with her. Mr. Carlton did not relish so summary a mode of proceeding.

"Stop!" he exclaimed; "stop! What does this mean? What's the matter?"

"She's dead!" shrieked Mrs. Gould. "She is lying dead and stark upon her bed."

"Who is dead?" repeated Mr. Carlton.

"Our lodger. The lady you came to see this evening—Mrs. Crane. The breath has just gone out of her."

Almost with the first word of explanation Mr. Carlton shook her arm away and darted off towards the house, she following in his wake. He disappeared within it; and just at the moment the Reverend William Lycett passed, the curate of St. Mark's Church. Mrs. Gould seized his arm as she had previously seized that of Mr. Carlton, sobbed forth some confused words, and took him up the stairs.

The nurse was standing at the foot of the bed, her eyes round with alarm; and Mr. Carlton had thrown down the bed-clothes and placed his ear close to the heart that lay there. He felt the damp forehead, he touched one of the hands.

"This is awful!" he exclaimed, turning his pale face upon them. "I left her well little more than an hour ago."

"Is she dead?" asked Mr. Lycett.

"She is dead," replied the surgeon. "What had you been giving her?" he demanded of Mrs. Pepperfly, his tone becoming stern and sharp.

It was the first indication of what the consequences might be to them, and Mrs. Pepperfly replied meekly, her apron held to her lips:

"Sir, I gave her her gruel, and after that I gave her her draught. It's of no good denying it."

"That draught!" repeated Mr. Carlton to himself in a low tone of reproach. Not so low, however, but that Mr. Lycett caught the words. "I was wrong not to take it away with me."

"Has she died from poison?" whispered Mr. Lycett.

"From poison—as I believe. What else can she have died from?"

Mr. Carlton, as he spoke, had his head bent over the mouth of the dead, inhaling the odour where the breath had once been.

"You are not acquainted with the properties of drugs as may be gathered from their smell, I presume, Mr. Lycett, or else——"

"Pardon me," was the interruption, "I am quite well acquainted with them. My father is a surgeon, and half my boyhood was spent in his surgery."

"Then just bend down here and tell me what you find."

The clergyman did as desired; but drew back his face instantly.

"Prussic acid," he said in a whisper; and Mr. Carlton gravely nodded in assent. He turned to Mrs. Pepperfly.

"What do you say she had been taking? Gruel? and the draught? The gruel first, of course?"

"Of course, sir. She took that soon after you left. There's the basin, by token, never took down again."

Mr. Carlton took up the basin pointed out to him. A little gruel remained in it still, which he smelt and tasted.

"There's nothing wrong here," he observed.

"And her draught, sir, we gave her some time after, three-quarters of an hour, maybe. Not a minute had she took it when—I shan't overget the fright for a year to come—she was gone."

"A year!" echoed Mrs. Gould from the door, where she had stood trembling and sobbing, her head just inside the chamber. "I shan't overget it for my whole life."

"Where is the bottle?" inquired Mr. Carlton.

"The bottle!" repeated the nurse. "Where now did I put it? Oh, it's behind you, sir. There, on the little table by the bed head."

The bottle which had contained the draught lay there, the cork in it. Mr. Carlton took out the cork, smelt it, recorked it, and placed it on the table, a dark scowl on his face.

"Do you smell anything wrong?" asked Mr. Lycett.

For reply the surgeon handed him the phial, and Mr. Lycett removed the cork for one moment, and put it back again. It was quite sufficient.

"Where did the draught come from?" inquired the curate. But the next moment his eyes fell on the label, and he saw that it had come from the surgery of the Messrs. Grey.

Mr. Carlton replaced the phial from whence he had taken it, and looked at the landlady. "Mrs. Gould, I think you had better go up and ask Mr. Stephen Grey to step round here."

Glad to be away from the death-chamber, yet afraid to remain alone, the woman was not sorry to be sent upon the errand. The streets under the bright moon were as light as day, and she discerned Mr. John Grey standing at his own door long before she reached him. His presence seemed to give an impetus to her speed and excitement, and she broke into sobs again as she made a dash at him.

"Oh, sir! this will kill some of us."

Mr. Grey, a man of strong mind, decisive in speech,—sometimes, if put out, a little stern in manner,—looked calmly at the widow. Like Judith Ford, he had no patience with nervous nonsense. He was a tall man, with aquiline features and keen dark eyes.

"What will kill some of us, Mrs. Gould? Our nerves?"

"Where's Mr. Stephen, sir? Oh, sir, she's dead! And it is that draught which Mr. Stephen sent down to-night that has killed her."

"Who is dead?" returned Mr. Grey in wonderment. "What draught? What are you talking about?"

"The lady Mr. Stephen is attending at my house, sir. He sent her a sleeping draught to-night, and there must have been poison

in it, for she died the minute she had swallowed it. I mean the young lady, Mrs. Crane, sir," she added, perceiving that Mr. Grey appeared not to understand her.

"Dead!" he uttered.

"Stone dead, sir. Mr. Carlton said I had better come up for Mr. Stephen Grey. He's there with Mr. Lycett."

Mr. Grey closed his own door and entered his brother's house. Frederick Grey was coming across the hall.

"Is your father in, Frederick?"

"No. I don't suppose he will be long. I don't know where he's gone, though. Uncle John, we had a letter from mamma this evening."

"Did he make up a draught to-night for Mrs. Crane, do you know?" continued Mr. Grey, passing over his nephew's gratuitous information.

"Yes, I know he did, for I was in the surgery at the time. A composing draught. Why? It was sent to Mrs. Crane."

"Why, it has just killed her, Master Frederick," put in Mrs. Gould. "It was prussic acid, they say, and no composing draught at all."

"What thundering nonsense!" echoed the boy, who appeared to have caught only the latter words.

"Nonsense, is it, sir?" sobbed the widow. "She's dead, at any rate."

Frederick Grey glanced quickly at his uncle, as if for confirmation or the contrary.

"I am going down there, Frederick. Mrs. Gould says she *is* dead. As soon as your father comes in, ask him to follow me."

The lad stood looking after them as they went down the street, his brain busy. At that moment he saw their assistant, Mr. Whittaker, approaching from the opposite side of the street. Frederick Grey took his cap from the hall where it was hanging, and went out to meet him.

"Mr. Whittaker, they are saying the new patient, Mrs. Crane, is dead. Do you believe it?"

"Rubbish," retorted Mr. Whittaker. "Mr. Stephen told me to-night she was as good as well again. Who says it?"

"Mother Gould. She has been up here to fetch Uncle John, and he has left word that papa is to follow soon. Tell him, will you?"

He vaulted off ere he had well finished speaking, caught up Mrs. Gould at her own door, and ran upstairs after his uncle. Mr. Grey had already entered the chamber of Mrs. Crane. He first satisfied himself that she was really dead, and then began to search out the particulars. Mr. Carlton directed his attention to the bottle.

"Mr. Grey," he said, "you know how chary we medical fraternity

are of bringing an accusation or casting blame one on another; but I do fear some most unfortunate error has been committed. The phial has undoubtedly contained prussic acid in some state, and it appears only too certain that it is prussic acid she has died from."

"The phial has certainly had prussic acid in it," returned Mr. Grey; "but it is impossible that it can have been sent by my brother."

"He may not have made it up himself," returned Mr. Carlton. "Is the writing his? 'Composing draught to be taken the last thing. Mrs. Crane.'"

"That is his, and I believe he made up the draught himself. But as to his having put prussic acid in it, I feel sure he did not do so."

"I was here when it arrived, and I detected the smell at once," said Mr. Carlton. "At the first moment I thought it was oil of almonds; the next I felt sure it was prussic acid. Not that I suspected for an instant it contained sufficient to destroy life, the slightest drop, perhaps; though why Mr. Stephen Grey should have put it in I did not understand. Now I cannot tell you why it was, but I could not get that smell out of my head. I think it may have been from reading that case of fatal error in the *Lancet* last week. You know what I mean?"

Mr. Grey nodded.

"And before I left I told Mrs. Crane not to take the draught unless she heard from Mr. Stephen Grey again. As I went home I called at your house; but Mr. Stephen was not at home. I intended just to mention the smell to him. Had he said it was all right, there was an end of all apprehension; but mistakes have been so frequent of late as to put medical men on their guard."

"True," assented Mr. Grey.

"I have only a word to finish," continued Mr. Carlton. "When I found I could not see Mr. Stephen Grey, I went home, made up a composing draught, and was coming out with it when an urgent message was brought to me to see a patient. It lay in my way here, and I was as quick as could be, but—as you see—not sufficiently so."

Mr. Carlton slightly pointed to the bed as he concluded. Frederick Grey, who had stood by, listening eagerly, suddenly stepped up to him.

"Have you that draught with you, sir?"

"Of course I have," replied Mr. Carlton. But he did not seem pleased with the lad's tones, so unaccountably abrupt and haughty. "Here it is," he added, taking it from his pocket. "You will find no prussic acid in that."

Frederick Grey received the small bottle in his hand, uncorked it, smelt it, and tasted it, just as Mr. Carlton had done by the fatal

one. Doctors, as Mrs. Pepperfly remarked, like to taste physic; and Frederick had possibly caught up the habit, for he was already being initiated into the mysteries of the profession, under his uncle and father.

"No, there's no prussic acid in that," said he. "Neither was there in the draught made up by my father. I stood by him the whole of the time and watched him make it up."

They were interrupted by Mr. Stephen Grey. To describe his grief and consternation when he saw the dead, would be impossible. Mr. Whittaker had given him the message, had told him Mrs. Gould had been to them with a tale that the lady was dead; but Mr. Stephen, who knew of old Mrs. Gould and her fears, had set it down in his own mind that the lady had only fainted. Mr. Stephen heard the details with astonishment. They were unaccountable; but he warmly repudiated the suspicion as to the error having been made by himself.

"The thing appears to be perfectly inexplicable," exclaimed Mr. Lycett.

Stephen Grey laid his hand lightly on the brow of the corpse. "I declare," said he in an earnest, solemn tone, "in the presence of what remains of this poor young lady; nay, I declare it in a more solemn presence—that of God, who now hears me—that there was no prussic acid, or any other poison whatever, in the sleeping draught I sent here this night. Some foul play has been at work; or else some most grievous and unaccountable mischance has been unwittingly committed. Mr. Carlton, we must do our best to fathom this. You will aid me in it?"

Mr. Carlton did not hear the words. He had fallen into a reverie. Perhaps *he* was trying to account for the events of that night. His thoughts at that moment were not so much given to the unhappy dead, as to the face he had seen, or thought he had seen, upon the staircase landing earlier in the evening. That the face was none of his own fancy's conjuring: that it was not an appearance from the world of spirits, but one belonging to a living, breathing person, he felt in his judgment convinced. Did he connect that face with the dark deed which had followed? Did he suspect that that stealthy visitor, whoever it might be, was the serpent watching and waiting to deal the deadly blow? It cannot at present be told; but it is certain that Mr. Carlton did attach a dread fear, not the less strong for its being vague and undefined, to that shadowy face.

Vague indeed! More than once he caught himself fancying—nay, almost wishing—that it was only a supernatural appearance from the other world.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE COBWEBBED JAR.

WHAT was now to be done? How were they to set about fathoming—as Mr. Stephen Grey suggested—this dreadful business? It was so shrouded in mystery! The poor form, calm and still now, lay upon the bed, and the wondering gentlemen stood around it. Medical men come into contact with strange phases of human life, as exhibited in man's passage from the cradle to the grave, but this little knot of the brethren could only acknowledge to themselves, that of all strange occurrences which had ever passed under their notice, this appeared to be the strangest.

Mr. Carlton suddenly left his place from the far-side of the bed, held the door open, and motioned the two women from the room. He then in like manner motioned young Frederick Grey. But the boy, who was standing against the wall, close to it, did not stir in answer.

"I'd rather stay in, Mr. Carlton," he fearlessly said. "Is there any reason why I may not do so?"

Mr. Carlton hesitated. The words of the boy, spoken out so boldly, had caused the three gentlemen near the bed to look round. Mr. Carlton evidently did wish him to leave the room, but he as evidently did not see his way quite clear to making him do so.

"Is he discreet?" he asked, looking to the two brothers for an answer.

"Perfectly so," replied Mr. John Grey, who did not himself see any reason why his nephew should be expelled.

Mr. Carlton closed the door and returned to the group. "Mr. Stephen Grey has suggested a doubt of foul play," he began; "but is it possible that there can be any feasible grounds for it? I ask, gentlemen, because you are all better acquainted with these two women than I am. If either, or both of them——"

"Goodness, man!" interrupted Mr. Stephen Grey, in his impulsive manner, "you can't suppose I suspect Mother Pepperfly or the old widow! Pepperfly has her besetting sin, drink; and the widow is a foolish, timid old body; but they'd no more commit murder than you or I would commit it. What could you be thinking of, Mr. Carlton?"

"Pardon me," rejoined Mr. Carlton; "I merely drew the conclusion from your own remark. I'm sure I have no reason to cast a doubt upon them, but there has been no one else about the lady."

"If I understood Mr. Stephen Grey rightly, he did not intend to

cast suspicion upon any one," interposed Mr. Lycett. "His remark arose simply from his inability to account for the mystery."

"Precisely so," assented Stephen Grey. "If my thoughts had a bent one way more than another, it was whether the medicine could have been exchanged or tampered with between my house and this."

"It is not likely," said Mr. Grey. "Dick carries out his medicines in a covered basket. But another idea has suggested itself to me. Stephen, you have seen more of this unfortunate young lady than any one present; I never set eyes on her until now, and I dare say you, Lycett, can say the same. Mr. Carlton has seen her once only——"

"Twice," interrupted Mr. Carlton. "Last night and this. I should not have come down to-night had I known the hour for my meeting Mr. Stephen Grey here had so long passed. But I was with patients on the Rise, and the time slipped by unheeded."

"At any rate, you have not seen much of her," rejoined Mr. John Grey. "My brother Stephen has, comparatively speaking; and what I was about to ask him was this: whether it is at all probable that she herself added the poison to the draught. Was she at all depressed, Stephen?"

"Not in the least," returned Stephen Grey. "She has been as gay and cheerful as a person can be. Besides, she could not have added anything to the draught without being seen by the nurse; and we have her testimony that it was in her possession in the other room until the moment she administered it."

"Another thing," observed Mr. Carlton: "if the poison was added to the draught after it came here, how could the smell have been there on its arrival?"

"There lies the greatest enigma of all—why the draught should smell of poison when it got here," cried Stephen Grey.

"Nay," dissented his brother; "there's no wonder at its smelling of poison if the poison was in it; the mystery is, how and where it got into it. In my opinion, setting aside her tragical end, there is a great deal of mystery in the affair altogether. Who was she? Where did she come from? Why did she come here, a stranger to the place and to every one in it? And what a young thing she appears to be!"

She did indeed look young. A fair, pale, sweet face, lying there with its golden-brown hair falling around it. In the alarm of the first moment Mrs. Pepperfly had removed the cap, and the hair had fallen about the face. Her mouth was a little open, and the pretty pearly teeth were visible. They sighed as they looked upon her.

"May her soul have found its rest!" murmured the clergyman, bending over her for a moment ere they took their departure.

Mr. Carlton lingered behind the others. He searched her box with his own hands, the nurse lighting him, but it contained no clue whatever as to whom she might be. Nothing but wearing-apparel was in it; not a card, not a scrap of paper, not a letter; nothing was there to solve the riddle.

"Was this one trunk all she brought with her?" he asked.

"All, sir," replied Mrs. Pepperfly. "There's her workbox standing on the drawers there, by the bed-head."

The surgeon turned to the workbox, and examined it searchingly and thoroughly, as he had examined the trunk. Its contents consisted of cotton, needles, and all accessories necessary to work. There was a piece of embroidery finished; a baby's little cambric night-cap just begun; and there were a few paper patterns. Nothing whatever that could throw any light upon herself or her previous history. Her pocket—a loose pocket which Mrs. Pepperfly drew from under the pillow, where the invalid had kept it—contained a purse alone. Nothing else: and in the purse there was not much money. Her keys were on the drawers.

Mr. Carlton locked both the workbox and the trunk, and sealed them with his own seal. "I don't know much about the routine of these affairs," he observed, "but it is right, I suppose, to make all safe until the police come—they can break my seals if they wish to do so."

Barely had he spoken when a policeman appeared upon the scene. The news had travelled to the station, and the sergeant himself had come down: a big man, with round red cheeks. He listened in silence to the details, which were given him partly by Mr. Carlton, partly by the nurse, and took possession of the basin that had contained the gruel, and the bottle.

Next he took the candle and began to peer about the two rooms, for what purpose, or how it could at all help the inquiry, he alone knew. He carried the candle on to the landing and examined that, gazing up at the walls, raising his face to the window, through which the moonlight shone so brightly.

"Is that a door?" he suddenly asked.

Without waiting for a reply, he strode to the opposite end of the landing, and pulled open a door. The walls had been grained to imitate grey marble, and the door was grained also. It looked like part of the wall, and opened with a key only. It was the key which had attracted the keen sight of the sergeant.

"It's only a closet for brooms and dustpans, sir," spoke up Mrs. Gould, who was shivering timidly at the top of the stairs, holding on by the balustrade.

Even so. It was a very innocent closet, containing only a couple of brooms. The officer satisfied himself on that point, and closed

the door again; but Mr. Carlton, who had not previously known that any closet was there, immediately saw that it might have afforded a temporary hiding-place for the owner of that face he had seen so close to it earlier in the evening—if indeed that face had not been a freak of his own imagination.

Mr. Carlton could do nothing more, and he took his departure, the face all too present with him as he walked through the moonlit streets. It may be asked why he did not speak of it to the police—why he had not spoken of it to the gentlemen who had gathered with him round the death-bed. But of what was he to speak? That he thought he saw a strange-looking face, a face half ghostly, half human; a face with jet black whiskers; that he had thought he saw this on the staircase in the moonbeams, and that when he brought out the candle and threw its rays around, nothing was to be seen? It could not, if it belonged to a human being, have had time to get down the stairs unseen; that was impossible; and he had satisfied himself that it had not taken refuge in the bedroom. It is true there was this closet, which he had not known of, but he did not believe it could have gone in there and closed the door before he was out again with the light. Had he spoken of this, nine persons out of ten would have answered him—it was nothing but your own imagination.

And he was not sure that it was not his imagination. When he had descended the stairs after seeing it, he put the question in a careless sort of way to the landlady, as she came from the kitchen and Mrs. Pepperfly's society to open the door for him—was any strange man on the staircase or in the house?—and Mrs. Gould had answered, with some indignation, that there was no man at all in the house, or likely to be. Beyond that, Mr. Carlton had not mentioned the circumstance.

He went straight on to his home through the moonlit streets, and soon afterwards retired to rest, or rather to bed, for rest he did not get. That shadowy face haunted him in the strangest manner; he could not fall asleep for it, but lay tossing and turning until the morning. Then, when he did fall asleep, it haunted his dreams.

But we must return to an earlier hour of the evening, and to the Messrs. Grey. On leaving Mrs. Gould's house they parted with Mr. Lycett at the door, for their road lay in an opposite direction to his, and Mr. John Grey passed his arm through his brother's as they went up the street, young Frederick walking with them.

"This is a most unfortunate event," began Mr. John.

"It is to the full as mysterious as it is unfortunate," was the reply of his brother. "Prussic acid get into my composing draught! The thing is an impossibility."

"I wonder whether prussic acid had been mixed with the draught,

or whether the draught had been poured out and prussic acid substituted?" cried Frederick.

"Don't talk in that senseless way, Frederick," rebuked Mr. Stephen. "Who would pour medicine out of a bottle and substitute prussic acid?"

"Well, papa, it is pretty sure that she took prussic acid: so it must have been given to her in some way."

"From the drop left in the phial, it is clear that sufficient poison was mixed with the draught, to destroy life, and no more," observed Mr. John. "Stephen," he added, lowering his voice, and speaking with hesitation, "are you sure—pardon the question—but are you sure you did not, in some unaccountable fit of absence, make the mistake yourself?"

In good truth the affair, to Mr. John Grey, a man of sound practical sense, did appear most unaccountable. He had turned it over in his mind in all its bearings as he stood near the bed at Mrs. Gould's, and the only possible solution he could come to was, that the poison must have been inadvertently mixed with the draught when it was made up. And yet this appeared most unlikely, for he knew how correct his brother was.

"I have not mixed medicines for twenty years, John, to make so fatal a mistake at last," was the reply of Stephen Grey. "No; the draught was carefully and properly made up."

"I stood by and watched papa do it, Uncle John, and I am sure it was carefully mixed," said Frederick, rather resenting his uncle's doubt. "Do you think he could have taken down the prussic acid jar from its corner in a fit of absence of mind?—why, he couldn't reach it, you know, without the steps; and they have not been brought into the surgery to-day. Mr. Fisher saw him mix it too."

"Mr. Fisher did?"

"Fisher's seeing me happened in this way," interposed Mr. Stephen. "Upon leaving Mrs. Crane, soon after seven this evening, I saw Fisher at his door, and he made me go in. It was Mrs. Fisher's birthday, and he was about to tap a bottle of champagne. I helped them out with it, and then Fisher came out with me for a stroll, first of all turning into the surgery and waiting while I mixed the draught for Mrs. Crane."

"And was the bottle given immediately to Dick?"

"Not immediately," spoke Frederick: "it waited a short time on the counter while Dick finished his supper. But it was never lost sight of for one moment while it was there, as Mr. Whittaker can testify," he added, as if anticipating what might be his uncle's next question. "Whittaker came in before papa had quite finished the mixture—that is, he was putting the paper round the bottle—and we neither of us, I or Whittaker, left the room until Dick had gone out with it."

"Well, it appears most incomprehensible," exclaimed Mr. John Grey.

The first thing they did on entering was to question Dick. He slept at the top of Mr. John's house, and they proceeded to his room, rousing Mr. Dick from his slumbers; a shock-headed gentleman of fourteen, who struggled up in bed, his eyes wild with surprise.

"Wake up, Dick," said his master.

"I am awake, sir," responded Dick. "Am I wanted? Is there any physic to take out?"

"No, nothing of that sort," returned Mr. John. "I only want to ask you a question. Did you carry any medicine to Mrs. Gould's to-night?"

"I took some there, sir. A small bottle."

"Who gave it to you?"

"It was Master Frederick gave it to me, sir. I took it down and gave it to that there fat Pepperfly, for it was she that come to the door."

"Did you go straight there? or did you loiter on your way and put your basket down?"

"I went straight there," replied the boy earnestly. "I never loitered once nor let go the basket. Do that Pepperfly say I didn't take it, sir?—or that I took it broke?" he added, believing this unusual cross-questioning must mean some accusation against himself. "She's a big story-teller if she do."

"She has not said anything about you," returned his master; "I only want to know whether that little bottle of medicine was delivered at Mrs. Gould's untouched, in the same state that it was given to you."

"Yes, that it was, sir," was the boy's ready answer, and they could tell by his manner that he was speaking the truth.

Telling him he might go to sleep again, they went down to the surgery. No one was in it then, and the gas was very low. Mr. Stephen turned it up, and brought in the steps from an outside recess, where they were kept. In a remote corner of the highest shelf was a glass jar, labelled "Hydrocyanic Acid;" he mounted the steps and reached it down.

"See!" he exclaimed, "actually cobwebs upon it, woven from the stopper to the jar, and the dust on it an inch thick! that proves it has not been touched for some time. Why, it must be six weeks at least since we had occasion to use it."

It was the only preparation of prussic acid in their possession, of any sort, whether diluted or otherwise, and seeing the jar in this state completely did away with the half doubt on John Grey's mind touching his brother—he saw that he could not have used it. They leaned their elbows on the counter where the medicines were usually

compounded, and talked together over the affair, unable to offer any conjecture which might tend to solve it.

Thus absorbed, they did not notice the movements of Frederick. He, ever restless, ever seeking to be in action, as boys of that age are sure to be, took the white linen duster kept in the surgery, and dusted the glass-jar containing the poison. John Grey noticed this just as the act was accomplished.

"Oh, Frederick! what have you done?"

"Only taken off the dust and the cobwebs, uncle," answered the lad, wondering at the tone of alarm.

"Do you know," cried John Grey, speaking sharply in his excitement, "that that meddling action of yours may cost your father his life—or, at least, his reputation?"

The crimson of emotion rushed violently into Frederick's face. He made no answer.

"So long as that dust was on the jar, it was a sure proof that it had not been opened. Did you see the cobwebs spun from the stopper to the jar? What could have afforded more certain evidence that the stopper had not been taken out? Those friendly cobwebs might have saved your father."

Frederick Grey felt as if a lump had come into his throat and was choking him: as if it would take his whole life to atone for the imprudence of which he had been guilty.

"It is not likely that they will suspect my father," he exclaimed; "and as to accusing him—no, uncle, they will not do that."

"Whom will they accuse, think you? you or me? The medicine went out of this house, and was delivered untampered with to Nurse Pepperfly, was so administered to the patient, as far as we can learn or suspect. Mr. Carlton, a man in honourable practice, as we are, testifies that the draught did smell of prussic acid when the nurse placed it in his hand; he spoke of it at once, as the nurse proves. To whom, then, will people's suspicions be directed but to him who made up the medicine? You have faith in your father and I have faith in my brother that he could not be, and was not, guilty of the error of mixing poison with the sleeping draught; but that cobwebbed, dusty jar would have been proof that he had not done so, for those who have not faith in him. And now you have destroyed it! Go home to bed, boy! You have done enough mischief for one night."

The words, with all their sting, told on Frederick Grey. A remorse, amounting to positive agony, was taking possession of him for the imprudence he had committed. He did not reply; he was too completely subdued; he only longed to be away from all eyes, where he might indulge his sorrow and his repentance—where he might consider the means, if there were any of repairing his fault,

and pray to God to turn away the evil. He wished his uncle good night in humble tones, and turned to his father.

"Good night, and God bless you, my darling boy!" said Mr. Stephen warmly. "You did not do wrong intentionally. Be at ease; I am conscious of my own innocence, and I can put my hearty faith in God to make it clear to the world."

Frederick Grey went home and threw himself on his bed, sobbing as if his heart would break, in spite of his sixteen years. There was no one to whom he could turn for comfort. He was an only child, and his mother, whom he loved better than anything on earth, was away in a foreign land, in search of health.

Mr. John Grey and his brother remained in the surgery, and were joined by their assistant, Mr. Whittaker, who was a qualified surgeon. They talked the matter over with him, but no solution whatever could be arrived at.

"That the draught was given to the boy as Mr. Stephen left it, I and Frederick can both testify," said the assistant. "Dick, it appears, delivered it intact to Mrs. Pepperfly, who took it straight to Mr. Carlton, and he at once smelt prussic acid. I can't make it out at all. I have heard of magic, but this beats it hollow. What a pity but Mr. Carlton had brought the draught back with him when he called here."

"Did you see him, Whittaker?" asked Stephen Grey.

"I saw him. I was here alone. He came in and asked if he could speak a word to Mr. Stephen Grey. Mr. Stephen, I told him, was out, and he went away."

"Well," said Mr. Grey, "it does appear to be utterly incomprehensible; time, I suppose, will throw light upon it. As it does upon most things."

CHAPTER IX.

POPULAR OPINION IN SOUTH WENNOCK.

TUESDAY morning arose, the morning subsequent to Mrs. Crane's death, and South Wennock was in excitement from one end of it to the other. Every one was out of doors discussing the fatal event. Groups gathered everywhere; on the pavement, in the high-road, in the shops, at private doors, they congregated; one only theme in their minds. The previous day, Monday, had been pretty fruitful for the gossip-mongers, inasmuch as that they had food for gossip from the accident to Mr. Carlton and his groom; but that paltry news was as nothing compared with this. You are aware how prone we are to pick up any slight mystery; how we dive into it and strive

to make it ours, never resting until it is fathomed; you may then judge what a dish this must have been for South Wennock's inhabitants, enshrouded, as it was, with mystery on all sides.

Mr. John Grey was right when he assumed that it was on his brother the onus of the affair would fall. The opinion almost universally taken up was, that Mr. Stephen Grey had carelessly committed the error when making up the sleeping draught. The fact that he had correctly made up medicines all his life went for nothing now.

"I've driven my horses for fifteen year and never throwed 'em down to injure my passengers yet; but that's no reason why I mayn't have the ill luck some day," spoke the coachman of a four-horse stage, plying daily between two certain towns, and halting at South Wennock for breakfast, at the Red Lion Inn. "And that's just it, as I reckon, with Mr. Stephen Grey. He's been accurate up to now; but he may have made the mistake at last. The best of us is liable to 'em; as I'm sure the gentlemen standing round knows."

The gentlemen standing round nodded. They formed part of a group collected at the coach entrance of the Red Lion. The group comprised people of various degrees and grades—gentlemen, tradesmen, and labourers. In a small country place where the inhabitants are all known to each other, they are given to conversing familiarly together on local topics, without reference to social standing.

"Like me," struck in the blacksmith. "I druv a nail right into a horse's foot last week, and lamed him; and I'll be upon my word of honour such an awk'ard accident hasn't happened to me—no, not for years."

"Look at poor Toker, too!" said a little man, hovering respectfully on the edge of the crowd—Wilkes the barber. "How many a hundred times had he gone up the river in that punt of his, and always came home safely till last Friday was a fortnight, and then he got drowned at last!"

"I am sorry for Stephen Grey, though," observed a gentleman. "If it has been caused by any mistake of his he will feel it all his life. A tender-hearted man is Stephen Grey."

"It appears to me altogether unaccountable," remarked the Reverend Mr. Jones, who was the incumbent of St. Mark's Church, and had come out to join in the popular gossip and excitement. Perhaps because he was a connection of the Greys, his wife and Mrs. John Grey being sisters. "I hear that there was every proof that the jar containing prussic acid—and they have only that one, it appears, in their surgery—had not been touched."

"Mr. John Grey told me so himself this morning," interrupted another eager voice. "As a proof that their jar had not been touched, it was covered in cobwebs, he said, and remained so

covered after the lady was dead; only young Master Fred officiously wiped them off."

There ensued a silence. The crowd generally were deliberating upon this last item of news. It was the first time it had reached them. A substantial grocer named Plumstead spoke next. He was not particularly well-affected towards the Greys, for they dealt at a rival shop; and his voice was sarcastic.

"It had been better, then, to have let the cobwebs remain, so that the coroner and jury might have seen them."

"John Grey is a man of honour. He would not tell a lie."

One or two shook their heads dubiously, "We don't know what we might do, any of us, toward saving a brother."

"Look here!" broke out a fresh voice. "How *could* the poison have got into the draught, except when it was being made up? And how could Mr. Carlton have smelt it, if it had not been in it?"

"Of course it was in it. She would not have died if it hadn't been in it."

"There's the argument. The draught was sent direct from the Greys' surgery to Palace Street, and there's Mr. Carlton and Nurse Pepperfly to testify that it smelt as strong as it could of prussic acid. Why, Mr. Carlton, it turns out, had a sort of suspicion that it might do harm, and called in at the Greys' to ask about it, only Mr. Stephen was out and he couldn't see him. I heard say that he blames himself now for not having brought the draught away with him."

"Then, why didn't he bring it away?"

"Well, of course he never thought that it was as bad as it turned out to be. And there's a report going about that he desired the sick lady not to take the draught."

"Who says that?"

"I heard it."

"At any rate it seems to come to this," observed a gentleman who had not yet spoken; "that when the draught went out of the Messrs. Greys' surgery it went out with the poison in it. And as Mr. Stephen Grey himself mixed that draught, I don't see how he can shift the burden from his own shoulders."

"He can't shift it, sir," said a malcontent. "It's all very well to say young Master Fred wiped the cobwebs off the jar. Perhaps he did; but not, I'll lay, before they had been previously disturbed."

"Talking about young Fred," interposed the grocer, "he was going by my shop just now, and I asked him about it. 'My father mixed the draught correctly,' he said; 'I can be upon my word that he did, for I saw him do it.' 'Can you be upon your oath, Master Frederick?' returned I, just by way of catching the young gentleman. 'Yes, I can, if necessary,' said he, throwing his head back

in his haughty, fearless way, and looking me full in the face; 'but my word is the same as my oath, Mr. Plumstead.' And he went off as corked as could be."

"Young Fred is a chip of the old Grey block, open and honourable," cried the little barber. "He may have noticed nothing wrong, and if the boy says he didn't, why I don't believe he did."

"They say," cried another, dropping his voice, "that Mr. Stephen had his head full of champagne, and couldn't see one bottle from another. He and Fisher the land-agent had been drinking together."

"Nonsense!" rebuked the clergyman. "Mr. Stephen Grey is not one to take too much."

"Why, sir," cried the coachman, willing to bear his testimony—for the aspersion just mentioned had not found favour with him, or with many of those around him—"I heard that Mr. Fisher could witness in Mr. Stephen's favour, for he stood by and saw him make up the physic."

At this juncture Mrs. Fitch's head appeared at the side door, in search of the coachman.

"Now, Sam Heath! Do you know that your half-hour has been up this five minutes?"

Sam Heath, the coachman, hastened up the yard, as fast as his size would permit him. The fresh horses were already attached to the coach, and the passengers were waiting to mount.

Sam Heath had been gathering in the news of the great event that morning instead of attending to his breakfast, and had become absorbed in it.

Before the little diversion caused by this interference of Mrs. Fitch was over, another comer had been added to the knot of gossipers. It was the gentleman just spoken of, Mr. Fisher, the land surveyor and agent, a pleasant-looking man of thirty, careless in manner as in countenance. Considering what had just been avowed, as to his knowledge of the affair, it was no wonder that he was rapturously received.

"Here's Fisher! How d'ye you do, Fisher? I say, Fisher, is it true that your champagne was too strong for Stephen Grey last night, and caused him to mistake prussic acid for wholesome syrup of squills?"

"That's right! Go on, all of you!" returned Fisher satirically. "Stephen Grey knows better than to drink champagne that's too strong for him, whether mine or anybody else's. I'll just tell you the rights of the case. It was my wife's birthday, and——"

"We heard wedding-day," interrupted a voice.

"Did you? then you heard wrong. It was her birthday, and I was just about to open a bottle of champagne, when Stephen Grey went by, and I got him in to drink her health. My wife had two

glasses out of it, and I think he had two, and I had the rest. Stephen Grey was as sober, to all intents and purposes, when he went out of my house as he was when he came into it. I went with him and saw him mix up this identical, fatal medicine."

"You can bear witness that he put no prussic acid into it, then?"

"Not I," returned Mr. Fisher. "If it was said to be composed of prussic acid alone, I could say nothing to the contrary. I saw him pour two or three liquids together, but whether they were poison, or whether they were not, I could not tell. How should I know his bottles apart? And if I had known them I did not notice, for I was laughing and joking all the time. This morning, when I was in there, Mr. Whittaker showed me the place where the prussic acid jar is kept, and I can be upon my oath that no bottle, so high up as that, was taken down by Mr. Stephen. So much I can say."

"Well, of all strange events, this seems the strangest. If the draught——"

"Take care! we shall be run over."

The talkers had to scatter right and left. Sam Heath, in all the pride and glory of his box-seat, was driving quickly out of the yard to make up for time wasted, his four handsome horses before him, his coach, filled with passengers inside and out, behind him. It was the break-up of the assemblage, and they dispersed to fall into smaller knots, or to join other groups.

The probabilities appeared too overwhelming against Stephen Grey. A tide set in against him. Not against the man personally, but against any possibilities that the draught could have been fatally touched by other hands than his. In vain a very few attempted to take his part; to express their belief that, however the poison might have got into the draught, it was not put there by Stephen Grey; in vain his son Frederick reiterated his declaration, that he had watched the draught mixed, and that it was mixed carefully and correctly; their speaking was as a hopeless task, for the public mind was made up.

"Let it rest, Frederick," said Mr. Stephen to his son. "The facts will come to light sometime, I know, and then they'll be convinced."

"Yes—but meanwhile?" thought Frederick, with a swelling heart. Ay! what in the meanwhile might happen to his father? Would he be committed for manslaughter?—tried, convicted, punished?

CHAPTER X.

JUDITH'S PERPLEXITY.

UPON none did Mrs. Crane's death produce a more startling shock than upon Judith Ford. The hours kept at old Mrs. Jenkinson's were early, and the house had gone to rest when it happened, so that even the servant Margaret did not know of it until the following morning. She did not disturb Judith to tell her the sad news. Mrs. Jenkinson the previous night had kindly told Judith to lie in bed as long as she liked in the morning, and try to get her faceache well. Judith, who had really need of rest, slept long, and it was past nine o'clock when she came down to the kitchen. Margaret was just finishing her own breakfast.

"How's your face, Judith?" she asked, busying herself to make some fresh tea for her sister. "It looks better. The swelling has gone down."

"It is a great deal better," replied Judith. "Margaret, I did not think to lie so late as this; you should have called me. Thank you, don't trouble. I don't feel as if I could eat now; perhaps I may take something a little later on."

Margaret prepared the tea in silence. She was wondering how she could best break the news to her sister; she was sure, break it as gently as she could, that it would be a terrible shock to her. As she was pouring out the tea her mistress's bell rang, and she had to answer it; and felt almost glad of the respite.

"I wonder how Mrs. Crane is this morning?" Judith said when she returned. "Have you heard?"

"I—I'm afraid she's not quite well this morning," replied Margaret. "Do eat something, Judith—you'll want it by and by."

"Not well," returned Judith, unmindful of the exhortation to eat. "Has fever come on?"

"No, it's not fever. They say—they say—that the wrong medicine has been given to her," brought out Margaret, thinking she was accomplishing her task cleverly.

"Wrong medicine!" repeated Judith, looking bewildered.

"It's more than I can understand. But it—they say that the effects will kill her."

Judith gulped down her tea, rose, and made for the door. Margaret caught her as she was escaping through it.

"Don't go, Judith. You can't do any good. Stop where you are."

"I must go, Margaret. Those two women in there are not worth a rush, both put together; at least, the widow's not worth it, and

the other can't always be trusted. If she is in danger, poor young lady, you will not see me again until she's out of it. Margaret, then! you have no right to detain me."

Margaret contrived to shut the door, and placed her back against it. "Sit down in that chair, Judith, while I tell you something. It is of *no use* your going in. Do you understand?—or must I speak plainer?"

Judith, overpowered by the strong will so painfully and evidently in earnest, sat down in the chair indicated, and waited for an explanation. She could not in the least understand, and stared at her sister.

"It is all over, Judith; it was over at ten o'clock last night. She is dead."

The same hard stare on Judith's countenance. She did not speak. Perhaps she could not yet realize the sense of the words.

"Mr. Stephen Grey sent in a sleeping draught, to be given her the last thing," continued Margaret. "He made some extraordinary mistake in it, and sent poison with it. As soon as she drank it, she died."

Judith's face had been growing of a livid, death-like whiteness, but there was the same hard, bewildered look upon it. It suddenly changed; the hard look for intelligence, the uncertainty for horror. She uttered a low shriek, and hid her eyes with her hands.

"Now this is just what I thought it would be—you do take on so," rebuked Margaret. "It is a shocking thing; it's dreadful for the poor young lady; but still she was a stranger to us."

Judith had begun to shiver. Presently she took her hands from her eyes and looked at her sister.

"Mr. Stephen sent the poison, do you say?"

"*They* say it. It's odd to me if he did. But her death, poor thing, seems proof positive."

"Then he never did send it!" emphatically cried Judith. "Oh, Margaret, this is awful! When did she die?"

"Well, I believe it was about a quarter or ten minutes before ten last night. Mr. Carlton, it appears, called there sometime in the evening, and was there when the draught was brought in, and he smelt the poison in the bottle. He went off to the Greys to ask Mr. Stephen whether it was all right, but she had taken it before he could get back again."

The hard, stony look was reappearing on Judith's face. She seemed not to understand, and kept her eyes fixed on Margaret.

"If Mr. Carlton smelt poison, why did he not forbid it to be given to her?" she said after a while.

"Well—upon my word, I forget. I think, though, Mrs. Gould said he did forbid it. It was from her I heard all this; she came

in as soon as I was down this morning. She is in a fine way; she and old Pepperfly too; but, as I tell her, there's no need for them to fear. It doesn't seem to have been any fault of theirs."

Judith rose from her chair, where she had quietly sat during the recital. "I must go in and learn more, Margaret," she said resolutely, as if she feared being stopped a second time.

"Ay, you may go now," was Margaret's answer. "I only wanted to break the news to you first."

Mrs. Gould and Nurse Pepperfly were doing duty over the kitchen fire, talking themselves red in the face, and imbibing a slight modicum of comfort by way of soothing their shattered nerves. Judith saw them as she came up the yard. She crossed the passage and pushed open the kitchen door.

Both screamed. Too busy to see or hear her, sitting as they were with their backs to the window, her entrance startled them. That overcome, they became voluble on the subject of the past night; and Judith, leaning against the ironing-board underneath the window, listened attentively, and learned the particulars in silence.

"It is next door to an impossibility that Mr. Stephen could have mixed poison with the draught," was her first rejoinder. "I, for one, will never believe it."

The room upstairs was in possession of the police, but Judith was allowed to see it. The poor young face lay white and still, and Judith burst into tears as she gazed upon it.

In going down again she just missed meeting Mr. Carlton. He called at the house, and spoke to the policeman. He, the surgeon, had undertaken to assist the police in their search to discover who the strange lady was, as far as he could do so, and had already written to various friends in London if perchance they might have cognizance of her. He appeared inclined to be sharp with Mrs. Pepperfly, almost seeming to entertain some doubt of the woman's state of sobriety at the time of the occurrence.

"It is a most extraordinary thing to me, Mrs. Pepperfly, that the lady did not tell you I had forbidden her to take the draught," he said. "I can scarcely think but that she did tell you. And yet you went and gave it to her."

"I can be upon my Bible oath that she never said nothing to me against taking the draught," returned Mrs. Pepperfly, scarcely knowing whether to be indignant or to shed tears at the reproach. "Quite the contrairy. She wanted to take it, poor soul, right upon her gruel; and would have took it so, if I had let her."

Mr. Carlton threw his light grey eyes straight into the woman's face.

"Are you sure you remember all the occurrences quite clearly, Mrs. Pepperfly?"

Mrs. Pepperfly understood the insinuation, and fired up at it. "I remember 'em just as clear as you do, sir. And I'm thankful to goodness that as fur as that night goes I've nothing on my conscience. If it was to come over again to-night, me being still in ignorance of what was to turn out, I should just give her the draught, supposing it my duty, as I gave it her then."

"Well, it appears to me very strange that she should have taken it," concluded Mr. Carlton.

In the course of the morning, Judith, in going up the street, encountered Frederick Grey.

"Well, Judith," began the boy in tones of resentment, "what do you think of this?"

"I don't know what to dare to think of it, sir," was Judith's answer. "Nothing in all my life has ever come over me like it."

"Judith, *you* know papa. Now, do you believe it within the range of possibility—possibility, mind you—that he should put prussic acid, through carelessness, into a sleeping draught?" he continued, in excitement.

"Master Frederick, I do not believe that he put the poison into it."

"But now, look here. I was present when that medicine was made up. I saw everything my father put into it, watched every motion, and I declare that it was mixed correctly. I happened to be there, leaning my arms on the counter in a sort of idle way. When papa came in with Mr. Fisher, he told me to go home to my Latin, but I was in no hurry to obey, and lingered on. I am glad now I did so! Well, that draught I can declare was properly and safely prepared; and yet, when it reaches Mrs. Crane's, there's said to be poison in it, and she drinks it and dies! Who is to explain it or account for it?"

Judith did not reply. That hard look, telling of some strange perplexity, was overshadowing her face again.

"And the town lays the blame upon papa! They say—oh, I won't repeat to you all they say. But, Judith, there are a few yet who don't believe him guilty."

"I, for one," she answered.

"Ay, Judith. I——"

The lad paused. Then he suddenly bent forward and whispered something in her ear. Her pale face turned crimson as she listened, and she put up her hands deprecatingly, essaying to stop him.

"Hush, hush, Master Grey! Be silent, sir."

"Judith, for two pins I'd say it aloud."

"I'd rather you said it aloud than said it to me, sir."

There was a pause. Frederick Grey threw back his head in the manner he was rather given to, when anything annoyed him, and

there was a fearless, resolute expression on his face which caused Judith to fear he was going to speak aloud. She hastened to change the subject.

"I suppose there will be an inquest, sir."

"An inquest! I should just think so. If ever there was a case demanding an inquest, it's this one. If the verdict goes against my father, it will be my fault." And he forthwith described to her how he had wiped the cobwebs from the jar. "The worst of it is, speaking of minor considerations," he went on, "that no one knows where to write to her friends, or whether she has any. My father says you took a letter to the post for her."

"So I did, and the police have just asked me about it," replied Judith; "but I did not notice the address, except that it was London. It was to that Mrs. Smith who came down and took away the baby."

"They are going to try and find that woman. Carlton says she ought to be found if possible, because, through her, we may arrive at some knowledge of who Mrs. Crane was, and he has given a description of her to the police. He saw her on Sunday night at Great Wennock station. And now I must make a run for it, Judith, or I shall catch it for loitering."

The boy ran off. Judith gazed after him as one lost in thought, her countenance resuming its look of hardness and perplexity.

CHAPTER XI.

THE CORONER'S INQUEST.

THE rain was pouring down in torrents; nevertheless the street of South Wennock was alive with bustle, especially in the vicinity of the Red Lion Inn. It was Thursday, the day appointed for the inquest on the deceased Mrs. Crane.

The county coroner, whose residence was in the county town, was momentarily expected, and presently his gig dashed up, he and his clerk within it. It had been wished to hold the inquest on the Wednesday, but the coroner had put it off to suit his own convenience. He was a lawyer; a short, stout man, with black hair and a jovial-looking face; and as he emerged from under the large gig umbrella, he shook hands with some of the bystanders, his acquaintances. The clerk followed with a blue bag.

The coroner popped into the bar, swallowed a glass of hot brandy and water, and then proceeded to the board-room to swear the jury. It was a long room, the club-room of the inn. A table covered with green baize ran down it, at which they seated themselves, and the

coroner opened proceedings. Then they departed to Palace Street to view the body.

They went splashing through the rain and the mud, their umbrellas of little use, for the wind, remarkably high, kept turning them inside out. A genteel attendance escorted them: all the gentleman idlers in the place, all the curious tradespeople, the unwashed mob, and the street urchins. By the pertinacity with which these last dodged the jury's heels, it might have been thought that they believed the august functionaries to be living curiosities from a travelling wild-beast show.

The necessary inspection over, they splashed back to the Red Lion, and the business began. We may glance at the evidence of two or three of the witnesses, but not at all, for it would only be a repetition of what is already known, and would weary the reader. Difficulty the first was: What was the young lady's Christian name? No one could answer. Her linen, it was said, was marked with a large C, the initial letter of the word Crane, but with nothing else. Some suggested that this was more probably the initial of her Christian name—Caroline or Charlotte—but it was impossible to say. Her boxes had been officially examined; the large trunk and the workbox; but no clue as to who she was, or what she was, could be found. No scrap of paper indicated her previous abode, or why she came there.

Mrs. Fitch, the landlady of the Red Lion, told what she knew of the stranger's arrival by the omnibus, the previous Friday, and that she had recommended her to the lodgings in Palace Street. Mr. Stephen Grey testified to his being summoned to her on the same night, to the subsequent birth of the infant, and to her safe and healthy condition afterwards, up to seven o'clock on the Monday evening, at which hour he last saw her alive. Mr. John Grey and Mr. Brooklyn from Great Wennock, who had conjointly made the post-mortem examination, gave evidence as to the cause of her death—poison, by prussic acid; and there were other points of evidence, technical or otherwise, not necessary to go into in detail.

There had been a question raised by the coroner as to whether Mr. Stephen Grey should give his evidence. That gentleman expressed himself anxious and willing to tender it; and at length the coroner decided to admit it, warning Mr. Stephen that he need not say anything to criminate himself, and that what he did say might possibly be used as evidence against him. Mr. Stephen smiled, and replied that all he had it in his power to say might be used against him if it could be. He spoke to the making up of the sleeping draught, to the ingredients of which it was composed. Frederick Grey, his son, testified that he had seen it made up, minutely describing what had been put into it, as his father had

done, and to sending the draught by Dick, the boy. Dick, who was the next witness, protested, with a very red and startled face, caused by finding himself before a coroner's court, that he had taken it safely and given it into the hands of Nurse Pepperfly.

"Call Nurse Pepperfly," said the coroner.

Nurse Pepperfly was called for in the adjoining room and escorted in, in rather a shaky state, not induced by the imbibing of strong waters—from such she had that morning abstained—but from the general agitation caused by the anticipated proceedings. She had attired herself in her best, of course. A short black stuff gown, the worse for stains and dust, a scarlet woollen shawl, and a rusty black bonnet surmounted by a bow. The wind, as she came along the street, had taken the shawl, the bonnet, and the grey hairs underneath, and played with them after its own boisterous fashion; so that altogether Nurse Pepperfly presented a somewhat bewildered and untidy appearance. She wore pattens and white stockings, the latter a mass of splashes, and very distinctly visible from the shortness of the gown; but the extraordinary rotundity of Mrs. Pepperfly's person seemed almost to preclude the possibility of any gown being made long enough to conceal her legs. She took off her pattens when close to the coroner, and held them in one hand: her umbrella, dripping with rain, being in the other. A remarkable umbrella, apparently more for show than use, since its stick and wires projected a full foot at the bottom through the gingham, and there was no handle visible at the top. There was a smothered smile at her appearance when she came in, and her evidence caused some diversion, not only in itself, but from the various honorary titles she persisted in according to the coroner and jury.

"Your name's Pepperfly?" began the coroner.

"Which it is, my lord, with Betsy added to it," was the response, given with as deep a curtsey as the witness's personal incumbrances would permit.

"You mean Elizabeth?" said the coroner, raising his pen from his note-book, and waiting.

"Your worship, I never knowed myself called anything but Betsy. It may be that 'Lizabeth was written in the register at my baptism, but I can't speak to it. Mother——"

"That will do," said the coroner, and after a few more questions he came to the chief point. "Did you take in some medicine last Monday evening for the lady you were nursing—Mrs. Crane?"

"Yes, my lord, I did. It were a composing draught; leastways, that's what it ought to have been."

"What time was that?"

"It were after dark, sir, and I was at my supper."

"Can't you tell the time?"

"It must have struck eight, I think, your worship, for I had begun to feel dreadful peckish before I went down, and eight o'clock's my supper hour. I had just finished it, sir, when the ring came. It were pickled herrings that we had——"

"The jury do not want to know what you had for supper; confine yourself to necessary points. Who brought the medicine?"

"That boy of the Mr. Greys: Dick. An insolent young rascal, Mr. Mayor, as you ever set eyes on. He whips up the cover of his basket, and out he takes a small bottle wrapped in white paper and gives it me. I should like to tell you, my lord, what he said to me."

"If it bears upon the case, you can do so," replied the coroner.

"'Now, Mother Pepperfly,' said he, 'how are you off for Old Tom to-night?' My fingers tingled to get at his ears, my lord mayor and corporation, but he backed out of my reach."

Mrs. Pepperfly in her indignation had turned round to the jury, expecting their sympathy, and the room burst into a laugh.

"He backed away out of my reach, gentlemen, afeared of getting his deserts, and he stopped in the middle of the road and made a face at me, knowing I'd no chance of getting at him. They are as lissome as cats, them boys, and I'm rather stout to set up a run."

"I told you to confine yourself to evidence," said the coroner in reproving tones. "What did you do with the medicine?"

"I took it upstairs, gentlefolks, and Mr. Carlton came out of the lady's room, for he had just called in, and asked what it was I had got. I said it was the sleeping draught from Mr. Grey's, and he took it out of my hand, and said it smelt of oil of almonds."

"Oil of almonds? Are you sure that's what he said?"

"Of course I am sure," retorted Mrs. Pepperfly. "I didn't dream it. He took out the cork and he smelt the stuff, and then he said it. 'What could Mr. Stephen Grey be giving her oil of almonds for?' he said."

"Did you smell it?"

"I can't say I did, your lordship, much; though Mr. Carlton was surprised I couldn't, and put it towards me; but my nose hadn't no smell in it just at that particular moment, and so I told him."

"Why had it not?" inquired the coroner.

Mrs. Pepperfly would have liked to evade the question. She fidgeted, first on one leg, then on the other, put down her pattens and took them up again, and gave her umbrella a shake, the effect of which was to administer a shower of raindrops to all the faces in her vicinity.

"Come," said the coroner sharply, "you stand there to tell the truth. If the stuff emitted so strong a smell, how was it you could not smell it?"

"I had just swallowed a wee drop of gin, sir," replied Mrs. Pepperfly in a subdued tone. "When my supper were over, Mrs. Gould says to me, 'Just a drain, mum, to keep the herrings down, it's obligatory to your health!' and knowing I'm weak in the stomach, gentlefolks, which gets upset at nothing, I let myself be over-persuaded, and took a drain; but you couldn't have put it into a thimble."

"I dare say you couldn't," said the coroner, while the room tittered.

Mrs. Pepperfly's slip of the tongue took her aback.

"I meant to say as 'twouldn't have filled a thimble, gentry; I did indeed, for that was the fact; but no wonder my wits is scared out of me, a-standing up here afore you all. Just as I was a swallowing of the wee drain, the ring came to the door, so that I had, as you may say, the gin actually in my mouth, when I took the medicine upstairs; and that's the reason I hadn't no smell for anything else."

"Who took possession of the draught? You, or Mr. Carlton, or the sick lady?"

"I did, your honours. I put it by the side of the rest of the bottles on the cheffonier in the sitting-room, and——"

"Was there any other bottle there that could have been mistaken for this?" interrupted the coroner.

"Not one in all the lot," responded the witness. "They were most of them empty bottles, and bigger than the one the draught was in; and they are there still."

"Had any person an opportunity of touching that bottle in the time between your placing it there, and your administering it to the patient?"

"There wasn't nobody in the house to touch it," returned the witness. "I was nearly all the time afterwards in the room, and there was nobody else. When I went to get it to give it to the lady, Mrs. Gould lighted me, and I'm sure it hadn't been touched, for the shelf of that cheffonier's a tilting, narrow sort of place, and I had put the draught right in the corner, and there I found it."

"Mr. Carlton was gone then?"

"Mr. Carlton? Oh, he went directly almost after the draught came. He didn't stay long, your reverences."

"Witness, I am going to ask you a question; be particular in answering it. There has been a rumour gaining credit, that Mr. Carlton warned you not to administer that draught; is it correct?"

"I declare, to the goodness gracious, that Mr. Carlton never said nothing of the sort," returned the witness, putting herself into a flurry. "My lord—your worship—gentlemen of the honourable corporation all round" (turning herself about between the coroner and the jury), "if it was the last blessed word I had to speak, I'd

stand to it that Mr. Carlton never said a word to me about not giving the draught. He snifted at it, as if he'd like to snift out what it was made of, and he put a drop on his finger and tasted it, and he said it smelt of oil of almonds; but, as to saying he told me not to give it, it's a barefaced falsehood, my lord judge. He says he ordered Mrs. Crane not to take it, but I declare on my oath that he never said anything about it to me. And she didn't, neither."

The coroner had allowed her to exhaust her wrath. "You administered the draught yourself to Mrs. Crane?"

"Yes, I did, as it was my place to do, and Mrs. Gould stood by, a-lighting me. I put it out into a wine-glass, sir, and then, my mouth being all right again, I smelt it strong enough, and so did Mrs. Gould."

"The lady did not object to it?"

"No, poor thing, she never objected to nothing as we gave her, and she was quite gay over it. As I held it to her, she gave a snift, as Mr. Carlton had done, and she smiled. 'It smells like cherry pie, nurse,' said she, and swallowed it down; and a'most before we could look round, she was gone. Ah, poor young lady! I should like to have the handling of them that put it in."

Mrs. Pepperfly, in her sympathy with the dead, or rage against the destroyer, raised her hands before her and shook them. The pattens clanked together, and the umbrella was ejecting its refreshing drops, when an officer of the court seized her arms from behind, and poured an anathema into her ear.

"A coroner's court was not a place to wring wet umbrellas in, and if she didn't mind, she'd get committed."

"Were you conscious that she was dead?" inquired the coroner.

"Not at first, my lord judge, not right off at the moment. I thought she was fainting, or took ill in some way. 'What have upset her now?' I says to Mrs. Gould, and, with that, I took off her night-cap, and lifted her head up. Not for long, though," concluded the witness, shaking her head. "I soon see she was gone."

"You know nothing whatever, then, nor have you any suspicion, how the poison could have got into the draught?"

The coroner put this question at the request of one of the jury.

"I!" returned Mrs. Pepperfly, amazed at its being asked her. "No; I wish I did. I wish I could trace it home to some such a young villain as that Dick who brought the bottle down. I'd secure a good place to go and see him hung, if I had to stand on my legs twelve hours for it—and they swell frightful in standing, do my legs, my lord."

"The boy had not meddled with the medicine in bringing it?" cried the coroner, waving his hand to pass over the introduced irreverence.

"Not he, my lord mayor," was the reply of the witness. "I wish he had, that I might have been down upon him, the monkey! But I am upon my oath, and must speak the truth, which is that the bottle came neat and untouched, the white paper round it, just as the Greys send out their physics."

They had done with Mrs. Pepperfly for the present, and she made a curtsey to the four sides of the room, and sailed out of it.

The next witness called was Lewis Carlton. His gentlemanly appearance, good looks, and the ready manner in which he gave his evidence, presented a contrast to the lady just retired.

"Upon returning home from a journey last Sunday night," he began, when the coroner desired him to state what he knew, "one of my servants handed me a note, which had been left for me, he said, on the previous Friday. It proved to be from a Mrs. Crane, requesting to see me professionally, and was dated from the house in Palace Street, where she now lies dead. I went there at once, found that she had been confined, and was being attended by Mr. Stephen Grey, who had been called to her in consequence of my absence——"

The coroner interposed with a question;

"Have you that note to produce?"

Now the witness had not that note to produce, and, what was somewhat singular, he did not know for certain what had become of the note. When he was going to visit Mrs. Crane on the Sunday night, he looked for the note, as may be remembered, and could not see it; therefore he came to the conclusion that he had thrown it into the fire with the other letters.

"I really do not think I saved it," he answered. "It is not my custom to keep notes of that sort, and, though I do not positively recollect doing so, I have no doubt I put it in the fire as soon as read. I have looked for it since, but cannot find it. There was nothing in the note that could have thrown light upon the case; half a dozen formal lines, chiefly requesting me to call and see her, comprised it."

"Was it signed with her full name?"

"Her full name?" repeated Mr. Carlton, as if he scarcely understood the question.

"We have no clue to her Christian name. This note may have supplied it. Or perhaps it was written in the third person."

"Oh, of course; I scarcely comprehended you," answered Mr. Carlton. "It was written in the third person. 'Mrs. Crane presents her compliments to Mr. Carlton,' etc. That's how it was worded. I gathered from it that she did not expect to be ill before May."

"In your interview with her that evening did you obtain any information as to who she was?"

"Not the slightest. It was late, and I thought it unwise to disturb her. What little passed between us related chiefly to her state of health. I regretted my absence, and said I was glad to find she was doing well, under Mr. Stephen Grey. She wished me to attend her, now I had returned, and I understood her to say she had been recommended to me by friends, before coming to South Wennock."

"Do you know by whom?"

"I have no idea whatever, and I am not absolutely certain that she did say it. She appeared drowsy, spoke in low tones, and I did not precisely catch the words. I intended to ask her about it after she got better and was more equal to conversation. There are none of my own friends or acquaintance who bear the name of Crane—none that I can remember."

"Did you take charge of her from that hour?"

"Certainly not. I should not do so without her being professionally resigned to me by Mr. Stephen Grey. I met Mr. Stephen in High Street the following day, Monday, and I requested him as a favour to retain charge of her until that evening or the following morning. I found so much to do for my patients after my short absence, that I had not time to meet him, before that, at Mrs. Crane's. It was arranged that I should be there at seven in the evening, if I were able; if not, at ten the next morning."

"Did you keep the appointment at seven?"

"No, I could not do so. I did get down, but it was more than an hour later, and Mr. Stephen had gone. Mrs. Crane appeared to be very well, except that she was a little flushed. She was in very good spirits, and I told her I should take formal possession of her the next morning at ten. She seemed to think I might have done so that day, and I explained to her how I had been driven with my patients. I inquired if she was not satisfied with Mr. Stephen Grey, but she expressed herself as being perfectly satisfied with him, and said he had been very kind to her."

"Did you inquire of her then by whom she had been recommended to you?"

"I did not. She seemed restless, a little excited; therefore I put no questions to her of any sort, except as regarded her health."

"Did the draught arrive while you were there?"

"Yes. Whilst I was talking with Mrs. Crane, I heard a ring at the front bell, and some one came upstairs, and entered the sitting-room. I thought it might be Mr. Stephen Grey, and stepped in to see, but it was the nurse. She had a small bottle of medicine in her hand, which she said was the composing draught, and upon looking at the direction, I saw that it was so."

"Did you perceive that it bore any peculiar smell?"

"Yes, the moment I had it in my hands. Before I had well taken out the cork, the strong smell struck me. I thought it was oil of almonds; but I soon found it was prussic acid."

"It smelt of prussic acid?"

"Very strongly. The nurse professed not to be able to smell it, which I could scarcely believe. I wondered why Mr. Grey should be administering prussic acid, especially in a composing draught, but it was not for me to question his treatment, and I returned the bottle to the nurse."

"You did not suspect there was sufficient in it to kill her?"

Mr. Carlton stared, and then broke into a sort of bitter smile.

"The question is superfluous, sir. Had I suspected that, I should have taken better care than I did that she did not take it. Minute doses of prussic acid are sometimes necessary to be given, and I could not tell what symptoms had arisen in the patient that day. When I returned to Mrs. Crane's chamber, which I did for a few minutes before leaving, I could not get the smell out of my head. The thought occurred to me, could there have been any mistake in making up the draught?—for of course we all know that errors have occurred, and not infrequently, especially when inexperienced apprentices have been entrusted to prepare them. An impulse prompted me to desire Mrs. Crane not to take the draught, and I did so. I——"

"Did you acquaint her with your fears that there might be poison in it?"

Again the witness smiled. "Pardon me, Mr. Coroner; you do not know much of the treatment of the sick, or you would not ask the question. Had I said to the patient that I thought poison might have been put into her medicine by mistake, I should possibly have given her a dangerous fright; and all frights are dangerous to women in her condition. I told her I did not quite approve of the draught Mr. Stephen Grey had sent in, and that I would go and speak to him about it; but I charged her *not to take it*, unless she heard again from me, or from Mr. Grey, that she might do so."

"How do you account, then, for her having taken it?"

"I cannot account for it: my words were as positive as they could well be, short of alarming her. I can only think that she forgot what I had said to her."

"Did you also warn the woman—Pepperfly?"

"No. I deemed my warning to Mrs. Crane sufficient; and I did not see Mrs. Pepperfly about, when I left the house."

"Do you not think, Mr. Carlton, it would have been a safer plan, had you put the suspected draught into your pocket?" inquired one of the jury.

"If we could foresee what is about to happen, we should all of us

act differently in many ways," retorted the witness, who seemed vexed that his prudence should be reflected on, and who possibly felt irritated that there should be any grounds for it. "When a calamity has happened, we say, 'If I had known, I would have done so and so, and prevented it.' You may be sure, sir, that had *I* known there was enough poison in that draught to kill Mrs. Crane, or that she would disregard my injunction, and take it, I *shoula* have brought it away with me. I have regretted not doing so ever since. But where's the use of regretting? It would not recall her to life."

"Go on, sir," said the coroner.

"I went to the Messrs. Greys'. My intention was to see Mr. Stephen Grey, to tell him of the smell the draught bore, and inquire if it was all right. But I could not see Mr. Stephen Grey: the assistant, Mr. Whittaker, said he was out. I considered what to do; and determined to go home, make up a proper composing draught, and bring it down with me. I was rather longer over this than I had thought to be, for I found myself obliged to see a patient in the interim."

"You deemed a composing draught necessary for her yourself, then?"

"Mr. Stephen Grey had deemed it so, and we medical men rarely like to call into question another's treatment. But I did think it expedient that she should take a soothing draught, for she appeared to be flushed—rather excited, I should say. I was coming down with the fresh draught in my pocket, when I met the landlady in a wild state of alarm, with the news that Mrs. Crane was dead."

"Were you the first with her after death?"

"I was the first, except the nurse; but I had not been in the room more than a minute when the Reverend Mr. Lycett followed me. We found her quite dead."

"And, in your opinion, what was the cause?"

"The taking of prussic acid. There is no doubt about it. There was no mistaking the symptoms."

"Look at this phial, Mr. Carlton," continued the coroner: "does it bear any resemblance to the one which contained the fatal draught?"

"It appears to be like it. The directions and handwriting are similar. Oh yes," he added, as he took out the cork, "it is the same: the smell is still in it."

"Did you observe where the last witness, Pepperfly, put the bottle containing the draught, after you returned it to her? I mean when it was first delivered at the house."

"I cannot tell where she put it. I did not notice."

"You did not touch the bottle again, before you left the house?"

Mr. Carlton turned sharply round, facing the audience at the back of the room.

"Who called me?" he inquired.

There had been a great deal of talking, the last minute or two, amidst this crowd, and Mr. Carlton's name was mentioned in conjunction with others; but no one would confess to having called him.

"I beg your pardon. Mr. Coroner," he said, turning to resume his evidence: "I certainly thought some one called me; and that, whoever it might be, was guilty, considering the time and place, of disrespect to the law. You were inquiring if I had touched the phial again before I left the house, after resigning it to Mrs. Pepperfly: I neither touched it nor knew where it was."

"If the proceedings are interrupted again, I shall order the room to be cleared," said the coroner, directing his eyes and voice to that part whence the noise had proceeded. "Those who want to talk must go outside."

The coroner glanced over his notes; he had apparently come to an end, or nearly so, of the examination of Mr. Carlton.

"Before you retire, I must ask you one more question," said he, looking up. "Have you any clue to this mystery—any suspicion as to how the poison could have got into the draught?"

Mr. Carlton remained silent. Was he debating with himself whether he should tell of the face he had seen on the staircase only an hour before the death—the strange, dread face on which the moon was shining? It is certain that that mysterious face had haunted Mr. Carlton's mind more than was pleasant, both at the time and since. Was he doubting whether to denounce it now, as something which had no business in the house, and which might have been connected with the mystery? or did he shrink from the ridicule that would attach to him, at confessing to superstitious fears?

"You do not answer," said the coroner, amidst the dead silence of the court.

Mr. Carlton drew a long breath. His thoughts took a different bent, unconnected with the face.

"I cannot say that I suspect any one," he said, at length. "Neither can I imagine how the poison could have been introduced into the draught, except in the making up, seeing that it smelt strongly of prussic acid when it came to Mrs. Crane's."

Another silence, broken by the coroner.

"Very well; that is, I believe, all I have to ask you, Mr. Carlton; and I am sure," he added, "that the jury feel obliged to you for the ready and candid manner in which you have given your evidence."

Mr. Carlton bowed to the coroner, and was retiring; but the coroner's clerk, who appeared to have certain memoranda before

him to which he occasionally referred, whispered something in the ear of the coroner.

"Oh, ay; true," remarked the latter. "A moment yet, Mr. Carlton. Did you not encounter at Great Wennock, on Sunday evening, the person called Mrs. Smith, who took away this unhappy lady's child?"

"I saw a person in the waiting-room of the station, who had a very young infant with her. There is little doubt but it was the infant in question."

"You had some conversation with her. Did she give you any clue as to who the lady was?"

"She gave me none. I did not know what had occurred, and supposed the child to be the offspring of some resident at South Wennock. I told her that the child was too young and feeble to travel with safety, and she replied that necessity had no law—or something to that effect. I talked to her only a minute or two, and chiefly about the omnibus, which she said had bruised her much, in its reckless jolting over the ruts and stones. That was all."

"Should you know her again?"

"I might do so; I am not sure. I had no very distinct view of her face, for it was growing dark."

"Did she say where she was going?"

"No, she did not."

"That is all then, I think, Mr. Carlton."

CHAPTER XII.

MR. CARLTON RECALLED.

After Mr. Carlton's dismissal, the coroner and jury consulted for some time together, and the result was that Nurse Pepperfly was called for again.

"Now, Mrs. Pepperfly," the coroner began, "do you mean to repeat to me that the deceased lady made no objection to taking that draught?"

"She didn't make none at all, my lord mayor. If she had, why should she have taken it? she was missis. Quite the contrairy of her objecting, it were; for she asked for it as soon as she'd swallowed her gruel; but I told her she must not take one right upon the other."

"Mr. Carlton says he charged her not to touch the draught. And you tell me upon your oath that she took it without making any demur?"

"I tell you so, Mr. Mayor, upon my Bible oath, and I'd take

twenty oaths to it, if you liked. But if you and the honourable corporation" (turning to the jury) "can't believe me, why don't you please ask the Widow Gould?—From nine o'clock, or a little before it, the time Mrs. Crane had her gruel, the widow never was out of the room at all, and she can speak to all that passed as correctly as me. Not that you'll get much out of her," added Mrs. Pepperfly, in a parenthesis, "for she's a-shaking and sobbing with fright in the next room, afeared of being called in here. She thinks it's like being tried, you see, gentlefolks, and she says she never was had up before a lord judge and jury in her life, and never stood at a transportation bar."

After this luminous piece of information, Betsy Pepperfly finally retired, and the shaky Mrs. Gould was supported in, attired in the poke bonnet and the plaid shawl she had lent to Judith. To try to convince the widow that she was not about to be criminally arraigned was a hopeless task; her mind upon the subject of bars in general and courts in particular, presenting a mass of inextricable confusion. She carried some pungent smelling-salts, and some one had thrust into her hand a small bottle of vinegar, wherewith to bedew her handkerchief and face; but her shaking hand poured so much aside, that the whole room was impregnated with the odour.

"What's your name, ma'am?" asked the coroner, when the business of swearing her had been got over with difficulty.

"Oh, dear gentlemen, do be merciful to me! I'm nothing but a poor widow!" was the sobbing answer.

"Well, what's your name, if you are a widow?" returned the coroner.

"It's Eliza Gould. Oh, goodness, be good to me!"

"Now, if you don't just calm yourself and show a little common sense, perhaps you'll be made to do it," cried the coroner, who was a hot-tempered man. "What are you afraid of?—that you are going to be eaten?"

"I never did no wrong to nobody, as I can call to mind—and it's a dreadful disgrace to be brought here, and me a lone widow!" hysterically answered Mrs. Gould, bedewing her eyebrows and nose with vinegar.

"How old are you, ma'am?" snappishly asked the coroner.

"Old?" shricked Mrs. Gould. "Is this a court of that sort of inquiry?"

"It's a court where you must answer what questions are required of you. How old are you, ma'am?"

Mrs. Gould moaned, and brought out in a tone scarcely audible, that she believed she might be as much as forty-two.

The coroner looked at her grey hairs and her wrinkles, and perhaps he was not disinclined for a minute's sport.

"Forty-two," said he in a loud voice to his clerk; "take it down. You have spoken correctly, ma'am, I hope," he added, turning again to the witness. "This is a court of justice, remember, and you are upon your oath; you would not like to be tried for perjury."

Mrs. Gould sobbed, and shrieked, and finally went off into real hysterics. When the bustle was over, the coroner began again.

"We have not quite got over the question of age. How old did you say you were?"

"*Must* I tell it?" sobbed Mrs. Gould.

"Of course you must. And now, ma'am, take notice that I ask you for the last time; I cannot have the moments of the court wasted in this manner. How old are you?"

"I'm only fifty-six," howled Mrs. Gould, amidst a torrent of tears and vinegar and a roar of laughter from the room.

"Draw your pen through forty-two, Mr. Clerk; and now perhaps we can go on to business. What do you know regarding the young lady who took your rooms, Mrs. Gould?"

"I don't know anything of her, except that she had a ring on her finger, and therefore must have been married," replied the witness, whose answers in general life had a frequent tendency to veer from the point in question.

"Do you know where she came from, or why she came, or who her relations might be, or whether she had any?"

"She said Mrs. Fitch sent her to me, and she said her husband was travelling, and she said no more," continued the witness between her sighs.

"Did she say where he was travelling, or what he was?"

"No, sir. Oh me, I think I shall faint!"

"Perhaps you'll be so complaisant as to wait till your evidence is over, and then faint," suggested the coroner blandly. "Did she tell you that she purposed making a long stay?"

"She told me she meant to be ill at my house, and that she did not expect the illness until May. She made me tell her the names of the doctors at South Wennock, which I did, and I spoke up for the Mr. Greys, as was only neighbourly, but she said she would have Mr. Carlton."

"Did she give any particular reason for choosing Mr. Carlton?"

"She said she had a prejudice against the Greys, through something she'd heard; and she said some friends of hers had recommended Mr. Carlton. But I've had it upon my mind, all along, that it was the cabrioily did it."

"That it was what did it?" exclaimed the coroner, while the jury raised their faces.

"The cabrioily. She got me to describe about the Mr. Greys to her, what they were like; and she got me to describe about Mr.

Carlton, what he was like; and I did, sir, meaning no harm. I said that the Mr. Greys were pleasant gentlemen who contented themselves with a gig; and that Mr. Carlton was pleasant too, but grand, and had set up his cabrioily. I think that did it, sir, the cabrioily; I think she couldn't resist choosing Mr. Carlton, after that."

There was coughing and choking in the room, and the coroner's clerk shook as he took down the evidence. The witness pronounced words after her own fashion, and the stress she laid upon the "oil" in cabrioily was something new; indeed, the word, altogether, was new, in her lips.

"She wrote a note to Mr. Carlton," proceeded the witness, "and I got it taken to his house. And when the messenger came back with the news that he was away, she cried."

"Cried!" echoed the coroner.

"Yes, sir. She said the note she had sent to Mr. Carlton engaged him, and she could not afford to pay two doctors. But we told her that if Mr. Grey attended for Mr. Carlton, she would only have to pay one. And that, or something else, seemed to reconcile her, for she let Mr. Stephen Grey be fetched, after all; and when it was over, she said how glad she was to have had him, and what a pleasant man he was. The oddest part of it all is, that she had no money."

"How do you know she had none?"

"Because, sir, none has been found, and the police is keen at searching; nothing escapes 'em. She had the best part of a sovereign in her purse—nineteen and sixpence, they say, but no more. So, how she looked to pay her expenses, her doctor and her nurse, and me—and Mother Pepperfly boarding with me at the lady's request, and she don't eat a trifle—she best knew; and I say that it does look odd."

"You regaled Mrs. Pepperfly with gin," spoke up one of the jury, relaxing from the majesty of his office. "Was that to be charged for, or was it a personal treat?"

"Oh, dear, good gentlemen, don't pray throw it in my teeth," sobbed the widow. "I did happen to have a drop of the vulgar stuff in the house. It must have been some I got for the workmen when I moved into it three years ago, and have been ever since on the top shelf of my kitchen cupboard, in a cracked bottle. I couldn't touch a drop of gin myself without being ill, gentlemen; my inside would turn against it."

Perhaps Mrs. Gould's eyes likewise turned against it, for they were cast up with the fervour of her assertion until nothing but the whites were visible.

"Ahem!" interrupted the coroner, "you are on your oath." And Mrs. Gould's eyes came down with a start at the words, and her mouth with them.

"Leastways unless I feel very bad," she interjected.

"This is wasting time, ma'am," said the coroner; "we must hasten on. Can you account for the poison getting into the composing draught sent in by Mr. Grey? Did it get into it after it came into your house?"

The witness was considerably astonished at the question; considerably flustered.

"Why, you don't think I'd go and put it in?" she uttered, subsiding into sobs again."

"I ask you," said the coroner, "as a matter of form, whether there was any one likely to do such a thing; any one of whom you can entertain a suspicion?"

"Of course, gentlemen, if you mean to accuse me and Mrs. Pepperfly of poisoning her by prussic acid, the sooner you do it the better," howled the widow. "We never touched the bottle. As the Greys' boy brought it, so it was given to her. And there was nobody else to touch it—although Mr. Carlton as good as accused us of having a whiskered man in the house on the sly!"

The coroner pricked up his ears. "When was that?"

"The night of the death, sir. He was there when the draught came, was Mr. Carlton, and when I heard him coming down the stairs to leave, I ran out of the kitchen to open the door for him. 'Is there a man upstairs?' asked he. 'A man, sir,' I answered. 'No, sir; what sort of a man?' 'I thought I saw one hiding on the landing,' said he, 'a man with whiskers.' 'No, sir,' says I, indignant. 'We don't want no man in this house.' 'It was my fancy, no doubt,' answered he; 'I thought I'd just mention it, lest any scamp should have got in.' But now, gentlemen," continued the widow wrathfully, "I just ask you, was there ever such an insinuation put to two respectable females? I can bear out Mother Pepperfly, and Mother Pepperfly can bear out me, that we had no man in the house, and didn't want one; we'd rather be without 'em. And one with whiskers too! Thank you for nothing, Mr. Carlton!"

The words seemed to strike the coroner, and he entered a note in the book before him. When Mrs. Gould's indignation had subsided, she was again questioned. Her further evidence need not be given; it was only connected with points already discussed; and at its conclusion she was permitted to retire to the next room, where she had a prolonged fit of hysterics.

The coroner requested the presence again of Mr. Carlton. But it was found that Mr. Carlton had gone. This caused a delay in the proceedings. An officer was despatched for him in haste, and found him at his own home, engaged with a patient. He hurried him up to the court.

"What am I required for?" asked Mr. Carlton.

"I can't say, sir. The coroner said you were to be produced."

"I thought you had understood, Mr. Carlton, that it is expedient the witnesses should not depart until the inquiry be over," began the coroner, when he appeared. "Questions sometimes arise which may render it necessary for them to be examined again."

"I beg your pardon," replied Mr. Carlton; "I had no idea I was not at liberty to return home; or that I should be wanted again."

The coroner placed his arms on the table beside him, and leaned towards Mr. Carlton.

"What is this tale?" asked he, "about your having seen a man secreted on the stairs, or landing, on the night of the mur—," the coroner coughed, to drown the word which had all but escaped his lips—"on the night of the death?"

A scarlet tinge, born of emotion, flushed the face of Mr. Carlton. Were his superstitious feelings going to be probed for the benefit of the crowded court?

"Who says I saw one?" inquired he.

"That is not the question," sharply returned the coroner. "Did you see one?"

"No, I did not."

"The last witness, Eliza Gould, testifies that you did—or thought you did."

"The facts are these," said Mr. Carlton. "As I was leaving the patient, the moonbeams shone on the landing through the staircase window, and for the moment I certainly did think I saw a face—the face of a person leaning against the wall."

"What sort of a face?" interrupted the coroner. "A man's or a woman's?"

"Oh, a man's, decidedly. A pale face, as it appeared to me, with thick black whiskers. I believe *now* it was my fancy. It was just a momentary glimpse, or rather idea, and was over directly. Moonbeams, it is well known, play curious tricks and turns with the eyesight. I fetched the candle and examined the landing, but no person was to be seen. Before I had well got down the stairs, a conviction was stealing over me that I had deceived myself; that there had been really nothing there; but I certainly did ask the woman Gould, when she came to open the door for me, whether or not any strange man was in the house."

"She said, 'No'?"

"Yes: and was intensely offended at my putting the question."

The coroner mused. Turning to the jury, he spoke confidentially.

"You see, gentlemen, had there been really any one concealed upon the stairs, it would be a most suspicious point; one demanding full investigation. That medicine was in the adjoining room, open to the landing, and within any one's power who chose to enter;

for the lady in bed could not be supposed to see what took place in the next apartment, and the two women were downstairs. Nothing more easy than for the cork to be abstracted from the medicine sent by the Messrs. Grey, and a few deadly drops poured into it. Provided, I say, the person so concealed there had a wish to do so."

The jury looked grave, and one of them addressed Mr. Carlton:

"Can't you carry your mind back, sir, with any degree of certainty?"

"There is quite a sufficient degree of certainty in my mind," replied Mr. Carlton. "I feel convinced, I feel sure, that the face existed only in my fancy. I had gone out from the light room to the dark landing,—dark except for the moonbeams—and——"

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Carlton," interrupted another juryman, "but the witnesses, Pepperfly and Gould, have deposed that the lady's chamber was in darkness—that the candle was in the adjoining sitting-room, where she preferred to have it left."

"Have they? I almost forget. Then in passing through the sitting-room my eyes must have been dazzled by the light, for I know that the landing appeared dark. You are right," added Mr. Carlton. "I remember now that the candle was in the sitting-room, for it was from there I fetched it to search the landing."

"Why did you not mention this, witness, when you were first examined?" asked the coroner.

"Mention what, sir? That I fancied I saw a face in the dark, which turned out to be all moonshine?" retorted the witness. "Verily I should be only too glad to mention anything that would bear upon the case, but I might have got laughed at for my pains."

"You attach no importance to it, then?"

"None whatever. I feel certain that it was only a freak of my own fancy."

"Very well, sir. That will do for the present. Are there any more witnesses to examine?" continued the coroner, addressing the summoning-officer.

There were one or two who gave testimony of no importance, and they appeared to be all. Frederick Grey, who had been an eager listener to the witnesses, then stepped forward and addressed himself to the coroner.

"Will you allow me to make a statement, sir?"

"If it bears upon the case," replied the coroner. "Does it do so?"

"Yes, it does," warmly replied Frederick, his earnest, honest grey eyes flashing. "There has been a cruel suspicion of carelessness cast upon my father: I wish to state that it was I who destroyed the proofs by which it could have been refuted."

And forthwith he told the story of his heedless wiping of the cob-webbed jar.

"Was any one present when you did this, besides you and your father?" asked the coroner.

"Sir, did you not hear me say so? My uncle John."

"Let Mr. John Grey be called," said the coroner. "Gentlemen," he added to the jury, "I am going somewhat out of my legal way in admitting these statements; but I must confess that it does appear to me most improbable that Mr. Stephen Grey whose high character we all well know, should have been guilty of this fatal carelessness. It has appeared to me entirely improbable from the first; and I deem it right to hear any evidence that can be brought forward to refute the accusation—especially," he impressively concluded, "after the statement made by Mr. Carlton, as to the face he saw, or thought he saw, lurking near the chamber where the draught was placed. I acknowledge, in spite of Mr. Carlton's stated conviction, that I am by no means convinced that that face was not real. It may have been the face of some deadly enemy of the ill-fated young lady; one who may have followed her to South Wennock for the purpose of destroying her, and stolen nefariously into the house; and then, his work accomplished, have stolen out again."

"With all due deference, Mr. Coroner, to your superior judgment," interposed a juryman, "the suspicion that the poison may have been introduced into the draught after it was in the Widow Gould's house, appears to be disposed of by the fact that it smelt strongly of it when it was first brought in—as sworn to by Mr. Carlton."

"True, true," said the coroner musingly. "It is involved in much mystery. Stand forward, Mr. Grey. Were you present when your nephew wiped the cobwebs and dust from the jar of hydrocyanic acid?" continued the coroner, after the new witness had been sworn.

"I was," replied Mr. John Grey. "My brother Stephen reached down the jar, which he had to do by means of steps, from its usual place, and the dust and cobwebs were much collected on it, the cobwebs being woven over the stopper—a certain proof that it had not recently been opened."

"This was after the death had taken place?"

"It was just after it; when we returned home from seeing the body. My brother remarked that it was a proof, or would be a proof—I forget his exact words—that he had not used the hydrocyanic acid; and whilst he and I were closely talking, Frederick, unconscious of course of the mischief he was doing, took a duster and wiped the jar. I was not in time to stop him. I pointed out what he had done, and how it might tell against his father, and he was overwhelmed with contrition; but the mischief was over and could not be remedied."

"You had no other hydrocyanic acid in your house, except this?"

"None at all; none whatever."

The coroner turned to the jury.

"If this statement of Mr. John Grey's be correct—and it bears out his nephew's—we must acknowledge that Mr. Stephen could not have put prussic acid into the draught when making it up. He could not have done so, in my opinion."

The jury assented. "Certainly he could not," they said, "if the testimony were correct."

"Well, gentlemen, we know John Grey to be an upright man and a good man; *and he is on his oath before his Maker.*"

Scarcely had the coroner spoken when a commotion was heard outside—a noise as of a crowd in the street, swarming up to the Red Lion. What was it? What could it be? The coroner and jury suspended proceedings for a moment, until the disturbance should subside.

But, instead of subsiding, it only came nearer and nearer; and at length burst into the room—eager people with eager faces—all in a state of excitement, all trying to pour forth the news at once.

Some additional evidence had been found.

The whole room rose, even the coroner and jury, so apt are the most official of us to be led away by excitement. What had come to light? Imaginations are quick, and the jury were allowing theirs a wide range. Some few of them jumped to the conclusion that, at least, Dick, the boy, had confessed to having been waylaid and bribed, to allow of poison being put into the draught; but by far the greater number anticipated that the body and legs belonging to the mysterious face had turned up, and were being marched before the coroner.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE TORN NOTE.

THE whole inquest-room, metaphorically speaking, was on its legs —coroner, jury, spectators—as the rushing tide of eager faces surged into it. What were the tidings they had brought?—what new evidence had come to light? Nothing very great, after all.

It was only a part of a letter. In the pocket of the dress which the unhappy lady had worn on the Friday, the day of her arrival at South Wennock, had just been found a half-sheet of note-paper, with some lines of writing on it and a great blot of ink. It was a somewhat remarkable fact that this dress, hanging up the whole time behind the bedroom door, had been overlooked both by the police and by Mr. Carlton, and was not searched by either. The

coroner smoothed the crumpled sheet of writing, read it aloud for the information of the jury, and then passed it round for their inspection. It ran as follows:—

"13, *Palace Street, South Wennock,*
"*Friday Evening, March* 10, 1848.

"My dearest Husband,—You will be suprised to hear of my journey, and that I am safe at South Wennock. I know you will be angry, but I cannot help it, and we will talk over things when we meet. I have asked the people here about a medical man, and they strongly recommend one of the Messrs. Grey, but I tell them I would prefer Mr. Carlton. What do you say? I must ask him to come and see me this evening, for the railway omnibus shook me dreadfully, and I feel anything but——"

In that abrupt manner ended the writing. There was nothing more except the great blot of ink referred to. Whether she had been suddenly interrupted, or whether the accident of the blot caused her to begin a fresh letter, could not be told; and perhaps would now never be known.

But with all the excitement, the noise, and the expectation, it positively threw no light whatever upon the mystery—of the mystery of who she was, of her arrival, or the greater mystery of her death. The coroner sat, after the letter had been passed back to him, mechanically smoothing the creased sheet with his fingers, while he thought.

"Call Mr. Carlton," he suddenly said.

Mr. Carlton was found in the yard of the inn, talking to some of the many outside idlers whom the proceedings had gathered together. After the rebuff administered to him by the coroner, as to his having gone away before, he was determined not so to offend a second time, but waited within call.

"Wanted again!" he exclaimed, when the officer came to him. "I hope the jury will have enough of me."

"There's something fresh turned up, sir. You might have heard here the noise they made, bringing it up the street."

"Something fresh!" the surgeon eagerly repeated. "What is it? Not about the face?" he added, a strange dread mingling with his whispered tones.

"I don't rightly know what it is, sir. The crowd jammed into the room so that I couldn't hear."

"Mr. Carlton, look at this, will you," said the coroner, handing him the torn note, when he appeared. "Can you tell me if it is in the handwriting of the deceased?"

Mr. Carlton took the sheet, glanced at it, clutched it in his hand,

and strode to a distant window. There he stood reading it, with his back to the room. He read it twice; he turned it over and looked at the other side; he turned it back and read it again. Then he returned to the table where sat the coroner and jury, who had followed his movements in eager expectation.

"How can I tell, Mr. Coroner, whether it is in her handwriting or not?"

"You received a note from her. Can you not remember what the writing was like?"

Mr. Carlton paused a moment, and then slowly shook his head. "I did not take particular notice of the handwriting. If we had the two together we might compare them. By the way," he added, "I may perhaps mention that I searched thoroughly for the note in question when I went home just now, and could not find it. There's no doubt I threw it into the fire at the time."

Perfectly true. As soon as Mr. Carlton had returned home from his first examination, he had made a thorough search for the note. His conviction at the time was that he must have burnt it with the letters and envelopes lying on the table, those which he had thrown on the fire; it had been his conviction ever since; nevertheless he did again institute a search on going home from the inquest. He emptied some card-racks which stood on the mantel-piece; he opened the drawers of the sideboard: he went upstairs to his bedroom, and searched the pockets of the clothes he had worn that night; he looked in every likely place he could think of. It seemed rather a superfluous task, and it brought forth no results; but Mr. Carlton wished to feel quite sure upon the point.

"Then you cannot speak as to this handwriting?" asked the coroner.

"Not with any certainty," was the reply of the witness. "This writing, I fancy, looks not dissimilar to the other, as far as my remembrance carries me; but that is very slight. All ladies write alike nowadays."

"Few ladies write so good a hand as this," remarked the coroner, holding the torn sheet of paper. "Are you near-sighted, Mr. Carlton, that you took it to the window?"

Mr. Carlton threw his eyes full in the face of the coroner, incipient defiance in their expression.

"I am not near-sighted. But the rain makes the room dark, and evening is coming on. I thought, too, it must be a document of importance, throwing some great light upon the case, by the commotion that was made over it."

"Ay," responded one of the jury, "we were all taken in."

There was nothing more to be done; no further evidence to be taken. The coroner charged the jury, and he ordered the room to

be cleared while they deliberated. Among the crowds filing out of it in obedience to the mandate, went Judith Ford. Judith had gone to the inquest partly to gratify her own pardonable curiosity—though her intense feeling of interest in the proceedings might be characterized by a better name than that; partly to be in readiness in case she should be called to bear testimony, as one of the attendants who had helped to nurse the lady through her illness.

She was not called, however. Her absence from the house at the time the medicine was taken, and at the time of the death, rendered her of no avail from a judicial point of view, and her name was not so much as mentioned during the day. She had found a seat in a quiet but convenient corner, and remained there undisturbed, watching the proceedings with the most absorbed interest. Never once from the witnesses, and their demeanour, as their separate evidence was given, were her eyes taken. Judith could not get over the dreadful death; she could not fathom the circumstances attending it.

In groups of fives, of tens, of twenties, the mob, gentle and simple, stood about, after their compulsory exit from the inquest-room, conversing eagerly, waiting impatiently. Stephen Grey and his brother, Mr. Brooklyn, Mr. Carlton, and a few more gentlemen collected together, deeply anxious for the verdict, as may be readily imagined; whether or not it would be manslaughter against Stephen Grey.

Judith meanwhile found her way to Mrs. Fitch. She was sitting in her bar-parlour—at least, when any odd moment gave her an opportunity of doing so; but Mrs. Fitch could not remember many days of her busy life so full of bustle as this had been. She was, however, knitting when Judith in her deep mourning appeared at the door, and she started from her seat.

"Is it you, Judith? Is it over? What's the verdict?"

"It is not over," said Judith. "We have been sent out while they deliberate. I don't think," she added, some pain in her tone, "they can bring it in against Mr. Stephen Grey."

"I don't think they ought, after that evidence about the cobwebs," returned the landlady. "Anyway, though, it's odd how the poison could have got there. And I say, Judith, what tale's this about a face on the stairs?"

"Well, I—don't know, ma'am. Mr. Carlton now says he thinks it was all his fancy."

"It has a curious sound about it, to my mind. I know this—if the poor young lady was anything to me, *I* should have it followed up. You don't look well, Judith."

"I can't say but it has altogether been a great shock and puzzle to me," acknowledged Judith, "and thinking and worrying over a thing does not help one's looks. What with my face having been

bad—but it's better now—and what with this trouble, I have eaten next to nothing for days."

"I'll give you a drop of cherry brandy——"

"No, ma'am, thank you, I couldn't take it," interposed Judith, more vehemently than the kindhearted offer seemed to warrant. "I can neither eat nor drink to-day."

"Nonsense, Judith! you are just going the way to lay yourself up. It is a very dreadful thing, there's no doubt of that; but still she was a stranger to us, and there's no cause for its throwing us off our meals."

Judith silently passed from the topic. "I am anxious to get a place now," she said. "I shouldn't think of all this so much if I had something to do. Besides, I don't like to impose too long on Mrs. Jenkinson's kindness. I suppose you don't happen to have heard of a place, Mrs. Fitch?"

"I heard to-day that there was a servant wanted at that house on the Rise—where the new folks live. Their housemaid's going to leave."

"What new folks?" asked Judith.

"Those fresh people who came from a distance. What's the name?—Chesney, isn't it? The Chesneys. I mean Cedar Lodge. It might suit you. Coming! coming!" shrieked out Mrs. Fitch, in answer to a succession of calls.

"Yes, it might suit me," murmured Judith to herself. "They look nice people. I'll go and see after it."

The words were interrupted by a movement, a hubbub, and Judith hastened to ascertain its cause. Could the deliberation of the jury be already over? Yes, it was even so. The door of the inquest-room had been thrown open, and the eager crowd were pressing on to it. A few minutes more, and the decree was spoken; was running like wildfire to every part of the expectant town.

"We find that the deceased, whose married name appears to have been Crane, but to whose Christian name we have no clue, came by her death through swallowing prussic acid mixed in a composing draught; but by whom it was thus mixed, or whether by mistake or intentionally, we consider that there is not sufficient evidence to show."

So Stephen Grey was yet a free man. His friends pressed up to him, and shook him warmly by the hand. While young Frederick, with a cheek of emotion, now white, now crimson, galloped home through the mud and shut himself into his bedroom, there to hide his thankfulness and his agitation.

CHAPTER XIV.

CAPTAIN CHESNEY'S HOME.

WRETCHED as the weather had been with the wind and the rain, the sun showed itself just before its setting, and broke forth with a red gleam, as if it would, in compassion, accord a glimpse of warmth and brightness to the passing day which had been longing for it.

Its beams fell on that pleasant white house on the Rise, the residence of Captain Chesney; they came glimmering through the trees and dancing on the carpet in the drawing-room. The large French window opening to the ground looked bright and clear with these welcome rays, and one of the inmates of the room turned to them with a glad expression; an expression that told of some expectant hope.

Seated at the table was the eldest daughter, Jane Chesney; a peculiarly quiet-looking, lady-like young woman of thirty years, with drooping eyelids, blue eyes, and fair hair. She had some loose sheets of paper before her that looked wonderfully like bills, and an open account-book lay beside them. There was a patient, wearied expression in her face, that seemed to say her life was not free from care.

Touching the keys of the piano with a masterly hand, but softly, as if she would subdue its sound, her brilliant brown eyes flashing with a radiant light, and her exquisite features unusually beautiful, sat Laura Chesney. Three and twenty years of age, she yet looked younger than she was; of middle height, slight and graceful, with the charm of an unusually youthful manner, Laura never was taken for her real age. She was one of the vainest girls living; though none detected it. Girls are naturally vain; beautiful girls very vain; but it has rarely entered into the heart of woman to conceive vanity so intense as that which tarnished the heart of Laura Chesney. It had been the one passion of her life—the great passion which overpowered other implanted seeds, whether for good or for evil, rendering them partially dormant. Not that vanity was her only failing; far from it; she had other less negative failings: self-will, obstinacy, and a rebellious spirit.

Latterly, another passion had taken possession of her; one which seemed to change her very nature, and to which even her vanity became subservient—love for Mr. Carlton. It is her eyes which are turning to this bright sunshine; it is her heart which is whispering he will be sure to come! She was dressed in a handsome robe of glittering silk, falling sleeves of costly lace shading her

small white arms, on which were gold bracelets. Jane wore a violet merino, somewhat faded, a white collar, and small white cuffs on the closed sleeves its only ornament. The one looked fit to be the denizen of a palace; the other, with her plain attire and gentle manner, fit only for a quiet home life.

And, standing near the window, softly dancing to the time of Laura's music, and humming, in concert, was the little girl, Lucy. Her frock was of similar material to Jane's, violet merino, but far more faded, the frills of her white drawers just peeping below its short skirt. She was a graceful child of eleven, very pretty, her eyes dark and luminous as Laura's, but shining with a far sweeter and softer light, and there was a repose in her whole bearing and manner, the counterpart of that which distinguished her eldest sister.

In the room above was the naval half-pay captain, unusually fierce and choleric to-night, as was sure to be the case when recovering from his gouty attacks. Far more noisy and impatient was he at these times than even when the gout was full upon him. The means of the family were grievously straitened, the captain having nothing but his half-pay—and what is that to live upon? They were encumbered with debt. Life had long been rendered miserable by it. And in truth, how can these straitened men, gentlemen, and well connected, as they often are, keep debt from their door? Captain Chesney was, to use a familiar expression, over head and ears in it. He had quitted the neighbourhood of Plymouth, where they had lived for so many years, simply because the place grew too hot to hold him, his creditors too pressing to be borne with. South Wennock was becoming the same, and people were growing troublesome.

It was Jane who bore the burden of it all. Perhaps no father had ever been loved with a more yearning, ardent, dutiful love than was Captain Chesney by his daughter Jane. To save him one care she would have forfeited her existence. If by walking through fire —and this is not speaking metaphorically—she could have eased him of a minute's pain, Jane Chesney would have gone lovingly to the sacrifice. Not upon him, not upon the others, had fallen the daily pains and penalties inseparable from a state of debt, but upon Jane. The petty hourly cares and crosses, the putting-off of creditors, the scheming how to make ten shillings go as far as other people made twenty, the anxiety for the present, the sickening dread of the future, and what might be the climax—Jane bore it all meekly, patiently. But it was wearing her out.

She sat now over last week's bills, leaning her aching head—aching with care more than pain—upon her hand, and adding them up. Jane was not a good accountant; few women are; they are not trained to be so; and she had to go over the columns more than

once. It was not the work which wearied and depressed her; it was the dread glance at the sums total, and the knowledge that these bills could only be put away with those of many many weeks back, unpaid. She put them from her, but with a gentle action—there was gentleness in every movement of Jane Chesney—and leaned back in her chair with a long-drawn sigh.

"Lucy, child, I wish you would not dance so. It puts me out."

The litttle girl looked half surprised. "I am not making a noise, Jane."

"But the movement, as you wave about, makes my head worse."

"Have you a headache, Jane?"

"Yes. At least—my head is so perplexed that it seems to ache."

Laura turned round, her eyes flashing. "You are worrying your brains over those wretched bills, Jane! I wonder you get them about! I should just let things go on as they can, and not torment myself."

"Let things go as they can!" echoed Jane, in a tone of pain. "Oh, Laura!"

"What good can you do by worrying and fretting over them? What good *do* you do?"

"Some one must worry and fret over them, Laura. If I were not to do it, papa must."

"Well, he is more fit to battle with such troubles than you are. And it is his own imprudence which has brought it all on. But for the extravagance of bygone years, papa would not have reduced himself to his half-pay——"

"Be silent, Laura!" interrupted Jane in tones of stern authority. "How dare you presume to cast a reflection on my dear father?"

Laura's face fell, partly in submission to the reproof, partly in angry rebellion. Laura, of them all, most bitterly resented the petty annoyances brought by their straitened life.

"Papa is as dear to me as he is to you, Jane," she presently said, in apology for her words. "But I am not a stick or a stone, and I can't help feeling the difference there is between ourselves and other young ladies in our rank of life. Our days are nothing but pinching and perplexity; theirs are all flowers and sunshine."

"There is a skeleton in every closet, Laura; and no one can judge of another's sorrows," was the quiet answer of Jane. "The lives that look to us all flowers and sunshine—as you term it—may have their own darkness just as ours have. Recollect the Italian proverb, '*Non v' è rosa senza spina.*'"

"You are going altogether from the point," returned Laura. "What other young lady—in saying a young lady, I mean an unmarried one—still sheltered from the world's cares in her father's home has to encounter the trouble and anxiety that you have?"

"Many a one, I dare say," was the reply of Jane. "For myself, if I only save trouble and anxiety to my dear father, I think myself amply repaid."

Too true; it was all that was thought of by Jane; the one great care of her life—saving annoyance to her father. In the long night watches, when a dread of what these debts might result in for Captain Chesney would press upon her brain, Jane Chesney would lay her hand on her burning brow and wish that England's laws could be altered, and permit a daughter to be arrested in place of her father. Laura resumed.

"And who, except us, has to live as we live? barred up—it's no better—in a house, like so many hermits; not daring to visit or be visited, lest such visiting might increase by a few shillings the weekly liabilities? It's a shame."

"Hush, Laura! If we take to repining, that will be the worst of all. It is our lot, and we must bear it patiently."

Laura Chesney did not appear inclined to bear it very patiently just then. She struck the keys of the instrument loudly and passionately, playing so for a few moments, as if finding a vent for her anger. The little girl had leaned against the window in silence, listening to her sisters, and turning her sweet brown eyes from one to the other. Suddenly there came a sound on the floor above as if a heavy walking-stick was being thumped upon it.

"There, Laura! that's because you played so loudly!" cried the child. "To-day, when I was practising, I forgot myself and took my foot off the soft pedal, and down came papa's stick as if he would knock the floor through."

Laura Chesney rose, closed the piano, not quite so gently as she might have done, and went to the window. As she stood there looking out, her soft dark hair acquired quite a golden tinge in the light of the setting sun.

Thump! thump! thump! came the stick again. Jane sprang from her seat. "It is not the piano: papa must want something."

A voice loud and imperative interrupted her as she was hastening from the room. "Laura! Laura!"

Jane drew back. "It is for you, Laura. Make haste up."

And Laura Chesney, as she hastened to obey, caught up a small black mantle which lay on a chair, and threw it over her white shoulders. It served to conceal her rich silk dress and the bracelets that glittered on her wrists.

Lucy Chesney remained a few minutes in thought as her sister left the room. Things were puzzling her.

"Jane, why does Laura put that black mantle on to go up to papa? It must be to hide her dress. But if she thinks that papa

would be angry with her for wearing that best dress and mamma's gold bracelets every evening, why does she wear them?"

A somewhat difficult question for Jane Chesney to answer—to answer to a young mind which was being moulded for good or for ill.

"Laura is fond of dress, Lucy. Perhaps she fancies papa is less fond of it."

"Papa *is* less fond of it," returned the child. "I don't think he would care if we wore these old merinos—oh, until next winter."

Jane sighed. "Dress is expensive, Lucy, and you know——"

"Yes, I know, Jane," said the little girl, filling up the pause, for Jane had stopped. "But, Jane, *why* should Laura put that best dress on at all? She used not to put it on."

Now, in truth, this was a question which had likewise occurred to Miss Chesney. More than once, of late, when Laura had appeared dressed for the evening, Jane wondered why she had so dressed. Not a suspicion of the cause—the unhappy cause which was to bring ere long a great trouble upon them—had yet dawned on the mind of Jane Chesney.

"And I want to ask you something else, Jane. What did you mean by saying there was a skeleton in every closet?"

"Come hither, Lucy." She held out her hand, and the child came forward and placed herself on a stool at Jane's feet. Jane held the hand in hers, and Lucy sat looking upwards into her sister's calm, placid face.

"If mamma had lived, Lucy, perhaps you might not have needed to ask me this, for she would have taught you and trained you more efficiently than I have done——"

"I'm sure, Jane," interrupted the child, her large eyes filling with tears, "you are as good to me as mamma could have been, and you teach me well."

"As we pass through life, Lucy, darling, troubles come upon us: cares, more or less heavy——"

"Do they come to us all, Jane? To every one in the world?"

"They come to us all, my dear; it is the will of God. I do not suppose that any one is without them. We know what our own cares are; but sometimes we cannot see what others can have—we cannot see that they have any, and can scarcely believe it. We see them prosperous, with pleasant and plentiful homes; nay, with wealth and luxury; they possess, so far as we can tell, health and strength; they are, so far as we can see, a happy and united family. Yet it often happens that these very people, who seem to us to be so fortunate as to be objects of envy, do possess some secret care, so great that it may be hastening them to the grave before their time, and all the greater because it has to be concealed from the world. Then we call that care a skeleton in the closet, because it is unsuspected

by others, hidden from others' eyes. Do you understand now, Lucy?"

"Oh yes. But, Jane, why should care come to everybody?"

"My child, I have just told you it is the will of God. Sometimes we bring it upon ourselves, through our own conduct; but I'll not talk to you of that now. You are young and light-hearted, Lucy, and you cannot yet understand the *need* of care. It comes to wean us from a world that we can stay but a little time in——"

"Oh, Jane! we live to be old men and women!"

Jane Chesney smiled; care and its bitter fruits—bitter to bear, however sweet they may be in the ending—had come to her early, and made her wise.

"The very best of us live but a short time, Lucy—for, you know, we must speak of time by comparison. Threescore years and ten here, and ages upon ages, life without ending, hereafter. Well, dear, care and sorrow and disappointment come to draw our love from this world and to teach us to long for the next—to long for it, and to prepare for it. Care is permitted to come to us by God, and *nothing* comes from Him but what is good for us."

"Why do people hide their care?"

"It is our nature to conceal excessive care or joy; they are both too sacred to be exposed to our fellow-mortals; they are hidden away with God. Lucy, dear, you are too young to understand this."

"I shall look out for the skeleton now, Jane. When I see people who seem a little sad, I shall think, Ah, you have a skeleton in your closet!"

"It exists where no sadness is apparent," said Miss Chesney. "I remember meeting with a lady—it was before we came to South Wennock—who appeared to possess every requisite to make life happy, and she was light-hearted and cheerful in manner. One day, when I had grown intimate with her, I remarked to her, that if any one ever appeared free from care, it was herself. I shall never forget her answer, or the deep sadness that rose to her face as she spoke it. 'Few, living, have been so afflicted with anxiety and care as I have been; it has come to me in all ways; and, but for God's support, I could not have borne it. You must not judge by appearances, Miss Chesney.' The answer took away my illusion, Lucy; and the tears rose involuntarily to my own eyes, in echo to those which earnestness and remembrance had called up to hers."

"What had her sorrow been, Jane?"

"She did not say; but that her words and affliction were only too true, I was certain. She appeared to be rich in the world's ties, having a husband and children, brothers and sisters—having all, in short, *apparently*, to make life happy. The skeleton exists where we least expect it, Lucy."

"Suppose it ever comes to me, Jane. Should I die?"

"No, dear," laughed Jane Chesney, the little girl's quaint earnestness was so droll. "It does not come to run away with people in that manner; it rather comes to teach them how to live. I will repeat to you a sentence, Lucy, which you must treasure up and remember always. 'Adversity'—adversity is only another name for care and sorrow, no matter what their nature," Jane Chesney broke off to say: "'Adversity hardens the heart, or opens it to Paradise.' When it shall come to you, the terrible skeleton of adversity, Lucy, you must let it do the latter."

"That is a nice saying, Jane; I like it," repeated Lucy. "'Adversity hardens the heart, or opens it to Paradise.'"

CHAPTER XV.

CAPTAIN CHESNEY.

LAURA had hastened upstairs at her father's summons. Captain Chesney was reclining in an easy-chair, his feet extended before him on what is called a rest. Those feet were swathed in bandages, as gouty feet sometimes must be. He was quite helpless, as far as the legs were concerned; but his tongue and hands were the reverse of helpless,—the hands perpetually kept up the noise of the stick, and the tongue its own sound, to the extreme discomfort of the household. He bent his eyes with displeasure upon Laura from beneath their overhanging brows.

"Was that you, playing?"

"Yes, papa."

"Oh, it was not Lucy?"

"Papa, you know that Lucy could not play like that."

"A good thing for her," roared Captain Chesney, as a twinge took him, "for I should have ordered her to be whipped first, and sent to bed afterwards. How dare you annoy me with that noisy tinkling piano? I'll sell it."

As a day never passed that Captain Chesney did not give utterance to the same threat, it made little impression upon Laura.

"Where's Jane?" he went on.

"She's at those everlasting bills, papa," was Laura's reply, who, truth to say, did *not* regard her father with the excessive reverence and affection that Jane did, and was not always in manner so submissively dutiful.

"Ugh!" retorted the captain. "Let her throw them behind the fire."

"*I* should," put in Laura; but the assenting remark greatly

offended him, and for five minutes he kept up an incessant scolding of Laura.

"Is that inquest over?" he resumed.

"I don't know anything about it, papa."

"Has Carlton not been up?"

"No," replied Laura, bending to smooth the pillow under her father's feet, lest the sudden accession of colour, which she felt rush to her cheeks, should be noticed. In doing this, she unwittingly touched the worst foot in the worst part; and the unhappy captain, one of the most impatient to bear pain that gout ever came to, shrieked, shook his stick, and finally let off some of what Miss Laura was in the habit of calling his quarter-deck language.

"Papa, I am very sorry; my hand slipped," she deprecatingly said.

"Did you ever have gout, Miss Laura Chesney?"

"No, papa."

"Then perhaps you'll exercise a little care when you are about those who do have it, and not let your hand 'slip.' Slip, indeed! it's all you are good for, to agonize suffering people. What do you do here? Why don't you let Jane come up?"

"Why, papa, you called me up."

"That cantankering piano! I'll send for a man to-morrow, and he shall value it, and take it away. What's the reason that Carlton doesn't come? He's getting above his business, is that fellow. He has not been here all day long. I have a great mind to turn him off and call in one of the Greys. I wish I had done so when we first came here; *they* are attentive. You shall write him a note, and tell him not to put his foot inside my gate any more."

Laura's heart turned sick. Sick lest her father should execute his threat.

"He could not be dismissed without being paid," she said in low tones, hoping the suggestion might have weight; and the captain growled.

"Has Pompey come back?" he began again, while Laura stood submissively before him, not daring to leave unless dismissed.

"Not yet, papa. He has scarcely had time to come back yet."

"But I say he has had time," persistently interrupted the captain. "He is loitering over that precious inquest, listening to what's going on there. One fool makes many. I'll loiter him with my stick when he returns. Give me that."

The captain rapped his stick violently on a table in his vicinity, pretty nearly causing the saucer of jelly which stood there to fly off it. Laura handed him the saucer and teaspoon.

"Who made this jelly?" he asked, when he had tasted it.

"I—I dare say it was Jane," she replied, with some hesitation, for Laura kept *herself* entirely aloof from domestic duties. She knew

no more than the man in the moon how they went on, or who accomplished them, except that it must lie between Jane and the maid-servant.

"Is it made of calves' feet, or cow-heels, I wonder?" continued the captain, growling and tasting. "If that's not made of cow-heels, I'm a story-teller," he decided, in another minute. "What does Jane mean by it? I told her I would not touch jelly that was made of cow-heel. Wretched stuff!"

"Then, papa, I believe you are wrong, for I think Jane ordered some calves' feet a day or two ago," protested Laura. But she only so spoke to appease him; and the irascible old sailor, somewhat mollified, resumed his pursuit of the jelly.

"What did Clarice say?" he asked.

"Clarice?" repeated Laura, opening her eyes in wonder. Not wonder only at the question, but at hearing so much as that name mentioned by her father.

The ex-sailor opened his, and fixed them on his daughter. "I ask you what Clarice said?"

"Said when, papa?"

"When? Why, when Jane heard from her the other morning. Tuesday, wasn't it?"

"Jane did not hear from Clarice, papa."

"Jane did, young lady. Why should she tell me she did, if she didn't? So you want to keep it from me, do you?"

"Indeed, papa," persisted Laura, "she did not hear from her. I am quite sure that she did not. Had she heard from her, she would have told me."

A cruel twinge took the captain's right foot. "You be shot!" he shrieked. "And serve you right for seeking to deceive your father. A pretty puppet I should be in your hands but for Jane! Here, put this down. And now you may go."

Laura replaced the saucer on the table, and went back to her sisters, thankful to be released.

"Papa is so cross to-night," she exclaimed. "He is finding fault with everything."

"Illness does make a person irritable, especially a man," spoke Jane, soothingly, ever ready to extenuate her father's faults. "And papa, you know, has been accustomed to implicit obedience in his own ship, just as if he were captain of a little kingdom."

"I think the sailors must have had a fine time of it," said Laura; and Jane forbore to inquire in what light she spoke; she could not always be contending. "What was the jelly made of, Jane,—calves' feet, or cow-heel?"

"Cow-heel."

"There! papa found it out, or thought he did: though I am sure

the nicest palate in the world cannot tell the difference, when it's flavoured with wine and lemon. He said he wondered at you, Jane, putting him off with cow-heel. I was obliged to tell him it was calves' foot, just to pacify him."

Jane Chesney sighed deeply. "Calves' feet are so very dear!" she said. "I did it for the best. If papa only knew the difficulty I have to go on at all."

"And any one but you would let him know of the difficulty," boldly returned Laura. But Jane only shook her head.

"Jane, have you heard from Clarice lately?" resumed Laura.

Miss Chesney lifted her eyes somewhat in surprise. "Had I heard, Laura, I should not be likely to keep the fact from you. Why do you ask that question?"

"Papa says that you heard from her on Tuesday; that you told him so. I said you had not heard, and he immediately accused me of wanting to keep the news from him."

"Papa says I told him I had heard from Clarice!" repeated Jane Chesney in astonishment.

"He says that you told him you heard from her on Tuesday."

"Why, what can have caused papa to fancy such a thing? Stay," she added, as a recollection seemed to come to her: "I know how the mistake must have arisen. I mentioned Clarice's name to papa, hoping that he might be induced to break the barrier of silence and speak of her. I said I thought we should soon be hearing from her. That was on Tuesday."

"Why do you think we shall soon be hearing from her?"

"Because—because"—Miss Chesney spoke with marked hesitation—"I had on Monday night so extraordinary a dream. I feel sure we shall hear from her before long."

Laura Chesney burst into a laugh. "Oh, Jane, you'll make me die of laughter, some day, with those dreams of yours. Let us hear what it was."

"No, Laura; you would only ridicule it."

Lucy Chesney stole up to her eldest sister. "Jane, tell me, do tell me; I shall not ridicule it, and I like to hear dreams."

Jane shook her head in that decisive manner from which Lucy knew there was no appeal. "It was not a pleasant dream, Lucy, and I shall not tell it. I was thinking very much of Clarice on Tuesday, in consequence of the dream, and I ventured to mention her name before papa. That is how the misapprehension must have occurred."

"Was the dream about her?" asked Laura; and Jane Chesney did not detect the covert irony of the tone.

"Yes. But I should be sorry to tell it to any one: in fact, I could not. It was a dreadful dream; an awful dream."

They were interrupted. A maid-servant opened the drawing-room door and put her head in. Rather a surly-looking sort of head.

"Miss Chesney, here's that coachman come again. He is asking to see the captain."

"Captain Chesney is ill, and cannot see any one," imperiously answered Laura, before Jane could speak. "Tell him so, Rhode."

"It's of little good my telling him, Miss Laura. He declares that he'll stop there all night, but what he'll see the captain, or some of the family. He bade me go in, and not waste my breath over him, for he shouldn't take an answer from me."

"I will go to him, Rhode," said Jane faintly. "Oh, Laura," she added, sinking into her chair again as the maid retired, "how sick these things make me! I could almost rather die, than see these creditors whom I cannot pay."

At that moment Captain Chesney's stick was heard in full play, and his voice with it, shouting for Jane. He brooked no delay when he called, and Jane knew that she must go to him. "He may keep me a long while, Laura; I do not know what it may be for—I do wish he would let me sit with him, to be at hand. Laura, could you, for once, go out to this man?"

"If I must, I must," replied Laura Chesney; "but I'd rather go a mile the other way. Though, indeed, Jane, I have no more right to be exempt from these unpleasantnesses than you."

"You could not manage with them as I do; you would grow angry and haughty with them," returned Jane, as she ran upstairs. "Coming, coming, coming, dear papa," she called out, for the stick was rapping furiously.

Miss Laura Chesney proceeded down the gravel-walk which swept round the lawn, and looked over the gate. There stood a respectable-looking man in a velveteen dress. He was the proprietor of a fly in the neighbourhood, which Captain Chesney had extensively patronized, being rather given to driving about the country; but the captain had not been found so ready to pay. Apart from his straitened means, Captain Chesney possessed a sailor's proverbial carelessness with regard to money: it was not so much that he ran *wilfully* into expense, as that he ran *heedlessly* into it. It never occurred to the captain, when he ordered the fly for an hour or two's recreation, and would seat himself in state in it, his legs up on the seat before him, his stick in his hand, and one of his daughters by his side, that the time for settling must come. Very pleasant and sociable would he be with the driver, for there lived not a pleasanter man, when he pleased, than Captain Chesney; and the driver would lean down from his box and touch his hat, and tell about this place they were passing, and the other place.

But settling time had come, was long past; a good deal of money was owing to the man, and he could not get it.

"Captain Chesney is ill; he cannot be seen," began Laura, in a haughty, impatient tone. "Can you not take your answer?"

"I've took too many such answers, miss," replied the applicant. "Here I come, day after day, week after week, and there's always an excuse ready. 'The captain's out,' or 'the captain's ill.' It is time there was a end to it."

"What do you want?" asked Laura.

"Want! why, my money. Look here, miss. I'm a poor man, with a wife and family to keep, and my wife sick in bed. If I can't get that money that the captain owes me, it'll be the ruin of me; and have it I must and will."

He spoke in a civil but yet in a determined tone. Laura wished from her very heart that she could pay him.

"Here you have been, miss, the captain, and some of you ladies, always driving about in my fly, hindering me from letting it to other customers that would have paid me; and when I come to ask for my just due, nobody's never at home to me."

"Is it much?" asked Laura.

"It's seven pound twelve shillings. Will you pay me, miss?"

She was startled to hear it was so much. "I wish I could pay you," she involuntarily exclaimed. "*I* have nothing to pay with."

"Will you let me in then, to see Captain Chesney?"

"When I tell you he is ill, and cannot see you, I tell you truth," replied Laura. "You must come when he is better."

"Look here, miss," said the man. "You won't pay me; perhaps it's true that you can't; and you won't let me in to see the captain, who could. So I'll be obliged to you to give him a message from me. I'm very sorry to annoy any gentleman, tell him; but I must do it in self-defence; and now this is Thursday, and as true as that we two, miss, stand here, if the money is not paid me between this and twelve o'clock on Saturday, I'll take out a summons against him for the debt."

The man turned away as he spoke, and walked rapidly down the hill. Laura leaned on the gate, giving way to her vexation. She was not so often brought into contact with this sort of unpleasantness as Jane, and perhaps it was well she was not, for Laura would not have borne it placidly. She felt at that moment as if any asylum, any remote desert, would be a haven of rest, in comparison with her father's home.

Suddenly she lifted her head, for one was approaching who had become to her dangerously dear, and she recognized the step. A rich damask flushed her cheek, her eyelids fell over her eyes that

they might hide their loving light, and her hand trembled as it was taken by Mr. Carlton.

"My darling! were you watching for me?"

She neither said yes nor no; the bliss of meeting him, of being in his presence, of feeling her hand in contact with his, was all-sufficient; rendering her far too confused to answer rationally.

And did Mr. Carlton love her? Yes, it has been said so—loved her with a powerful and impassioned love. He had been a man of wayward passions, stopping at little which could promote their gratification, and perhaps there were some passages in his bygone life which he did not care to glance back at; but his heart had never been awakened to *love*—to pure, spiritualized love—until he knew Laura Chesney. For some little time now it had been his ardent desire, his purpose, to make her his wife; and for Mr. Carlton to *will* a thing was to do it. Laura anticipated strong objection from her father and her family. Mr. Carlton cared no more for such objection than for the idle wind.

"Papa has been so impatient for you, Lewis," she murmured.

"Is he worse to-night?"

"Oh no. But he is very irritable."

"I did not intend to come in now," remarked Mr. Carlton. "I have a call to make a little higher up, at Mrs. Newberry's, and I thought I would take Captain Chesney on my return. I could remain longer by coming afterwards."

"I think you had better just come in to papa first, if only for a few moments," said Laura. "Perhaps," she timidly added, "you can come in again when you have been to Mrs. Newberry's?"

She touched the spring by which the gate was opened, a spring unknown to troublesome customers, and Mr. Carlton entered. He held out his arm to escort her to the house.

"No, no," she whispered, with a deep blush. "Jane is at the window."

"So much the better, my dearest. Yes, Laura, I will have you take it," he said with firmness, placing her hand within his arm. "You tell me you prefer that they should become acquainted with this by degrees, rather than that I should speak at once to Captain Chesney. But, Laura, I promise you one thing,—that I shall speak to him ere much more time has passed over our heads."

Jane, who had merely been wanted for a minute by her father, was in the drawing-room again, and standing at the window with Lucy, when Laura advanced, leaning on the arm of Mr. Carlton. Jane's face expressed its astonished disapprobation, and even the little girl was conscious that—according to the notions of the family—it ought not to have been.

"Jane, do you see Laura?"

"Laura is thoughless, my dear. She forgets herself."

Mr. Carlton went upstairs at once to Captain Chesney. He did not stay; and in coming down stepped in at the open door of the drawing-room. Lucy ran from it as he entered, and Laura had evidently only that moment gone in. Miss Chesney returned his salutation coldly.

"You have made a short visit to papa, Mr. Carlton," she remarked.

"I am coming in again after I have seen a patient higher up," he replied. "What an unfavourable day it has been!"

"Yes. Do you know whether the inquest is over?" continued Jane, her reserve merging into curiosity.

"It is only just over. And that is why my visit to Captain Chesney is so late this evening. They had me before them three or four times."

"What is the verdict, Mr. Carlton?" asked Laura; and the reader may remark that while she had called him by his Christian name, had spoken familiarly, when they were alone, she was formal enough with him now, in the presence of her sister. Deceit! deceit! it never yet brought forth good fruit.

"Nothing satisfactory," was the surgeon's answer. "They found that the cause of death was the prussic acid in the draught; but how it got into it they considered that there was no evidence to show."

"What should you have called 'satisfactory?'" asked Miss Chesney.

Mr. Carlton smiled. "When I say not satisfactory, I mean that the whole affair still lies in uncertainty."

"Do *you* suspect any one yourself, Mr. Carlton?"

"Not of wilfully causing the death. But," he added, in a more hesitating tone, "I have, of course, my own opinion."

"That it occurred through a mistake on the part of Mr. Stephen Grey?"

The surgeon nodded his head. "Through some mistake, undoubtedly; and it is impossible to look to any other quarter for it. But I should not care to express so much in public. It is not agreeable for a medical man to find himself obliged to cast reflection on a brother practitioner."

"I do not see that there can be the slightest shadow of doubt upon the point," remarked Miss Chesney. "The medicine was taken straight from Mr. Stephen Grey's hands to the sick-room, therefore how else could it have got into it? And your having smelt the prussic acid when the draught was brought up, is a certain proof that it must have been done in the mixing. Has anything come out about the poor young lady's connections? who she was, or where she came from?"

"Not anything," replied Mr. Carlton. "They cannot even discover her Christian name."

"And have you not found out who it was who recommended her to you, Mr. Carlton?" inquired Laura.

"I cannot find out at all. I wrote on Tuesday to the various friends in London whom I thought at all likely to have mentioned me, and have had answers from some of them to-day; but they deny all knowledge of Mrs. Crane. You see, there is a great uncertainty in every way; for we are not even sure that she did come from London."

Laura resumed. "It is said she was very beautiful. Was she so, Mr. Carlton?"

Mr. Carlton paused ere he gave his answer. "In health, and up and dressed, she may have been so; but I did not see her dressed, you know. I saw her only in bed, and by candle-light."

He spoke the last words as he crossed the hall to depart, for he was in haste to pay his visit to the house higher up the Rise.

CHAPTER XVI.

MISS CHESNEY'S FEAR.

LAURA CHESNEY stood at the window, watching the retreating form of the surgeon as he passed hastily down the garden path in the growing twilight. A short time, and he would be back again as he had promised; and Laura's heart beat at the thought, at the anticipated rapture of seeing him again, and she remained silent, losing herself in dreams of the sweetest delusion.

Only to be rudely awakened. Miss Chesney stepped to Laura's side and spoke, her gentle voice sounding strange in its sternness.

"Laura, could it be that I saw you walking through the garden when Mr. Carlton came, arm-in-arm with him?"

Laura turned away her face from her sister's view, or even in that fading hour Miss Chesney would have seen the red flush that overspread it at the words. She made no answer.

"It was not seemly, Laura. Mr. Carlton is only a surgeon: a man, so far as we know, without connections. And you are a Chesney."

"*With* connections" retorted Laura, who was growing vexed and angry. "And much good they do me!"

"Laura dear, we are, as may be said, of the noblesse: we may not lose caste."

"I think we have lost caste already, with these wretched, paltry debts hanging over and following us about from place to place like a shadow," was the petulant answer. "They degrade us pretty well."

"You mistake, Laura. If you intend that as a refutation to my

argument, you look at things in a wrong light. In one sense of the word the debts degrade us, because there always is degradation attaching itself to these petty debts; but they cannot in the slightest degree sully our caste; they cannot detract from our birth or tarnish it. Do not again allow Mr. Carlton to place himself familiarly on a level with you."

Loving him, as she did, with an impassioned, blind, all-absorbing love, Laura Chesney in her heart bitterly resented this reflection on Mr. Carlton. She was fast falling into that sadly mistaken, unhealthy frame of mind in which every consideration is lost in the one swaying passion—love. Openly she did not dare to dissent from her sister; it might have brought on an explanation for which Laura was not prepared; and Jane, deeming she had said enough, passed to a different topic.

"What did the flyman say?"

"He insisted on the money being paid to him between now and twelve o'clock on Saturday; failing it then, he will proceed against papa publicly. Jane, I am sure the man will carry out his threat. He was not loud and angry, not even uncivil; but he was resolute."

"And how is it to be procured?" moaned Jane, leaning her head upon her hand. "I would almost sell myself," she added, with a rush of feeling, "rather than bring these annoyances before papa! Oh, if I could only take these troubles more effectually off him!"

"Papa can battle with them a great deal better than you can, Jane," said Laura, who was far from sharing Jane's ultra-filial feeling on the point. "And it is more fitting that he should do so."

"It is not more fitting," retorted Jane Chesney, whose usually gentle spirit could be roused by any reproach cast on him. "He is my dear, dear father, and I ask no better than to devote my life to warding off care from his."

"Would you *wish* no better?" asked Laura in low, wondering tones, as she glanced at the bliss presenting itself for *her* future life —the spending it with Lewis Carlton.

"Nor wish better," replied Jane. And the younger sister gazed at her in compassion and half in disbelief.

"There are other petty cares coming upon us, Laura," resumed Jane in a different tone. "Rhode has given me warning."

"Rhode has!" quickly echoed Laura in surprise. "What for?"

"To 'better herself,' she said. I suspect the true motive is, that she is tired of the place. There is a great deal to do; and she hinted, somewhat insolently, that she did not like a service where applicants were continually coming for money only to be put off; it 'tried her temper.' I told her she might go the instant I could procure a fresh servant. I do not choose to keep dissatisfied people in the house longer than can be helped. She—— What is it, Lucy?"

The little girl had come running in, eagerly. "Jane, a young woman wants to see you."

"Another creditor," thought Jane with a sinking heart. "Is it the woman from the fruit-shop, Lucy?"

"Oh no. Rhode says it is a young woman come after the place. She has taken her into the kitchen, and wished me to ask if you would please to see her."

Miss Chesney looked as though she scarcely understood. "A young woman come after the place!" she repeated. "Why, it is not an hour since Rhode told me she must leave! Ring the bell, Lucy."

Rhode came in, in answer. Miss Chesney requested an explanation with quiet dignity, and Rhode turned red, and put on a defiant look, as if she could be again insolent if she pleased.

"I have made up my mind to it some days, Miss Chesney, and I dare say I may have spoken of it abroad. The young woman says Mrs. Fitch at the Lion told her of the place."

"Show the young woman into the dining-room," said Miss Chesney. And she proceeded thither, encountering Pompey on her way, who informed her of the termination of the inquest, and its result.

In the dining-room stood Judith Ford. She had come straight up as soon as the inquest was over. Neatly dressed in good mourning, steady in demeanour, her face full of sense and thought, Jane Chesney took a fancy to her at the first glance. Judith gave a few particulars as to herself, and concluded with observing that she had been informed by Mrs. Fitch it was a housemaid who was required, but the servant Rhode had now told her it was a cook.

"In point of fact, it may be said to be both," replied Miss Chesney. "We require a servant who can undertake both duties—a maid-of-all-work, as it is called. We are gentle-people and highly connected," she hastened to add, not in a spirit of proud, mistaken boasting, but as if it were due to their own dignity to explain so far: "but my father, Captain Chesney, has a very limited income, which obliges us to keep as few servants as possible. Could you take such a place?"

Judith reflected a moment before giving her reply. In her time she had lived in the capacity of cook and was equal to its duties, but it was not the place she would have preferred.

"Should I be the only servant kept, ma'am?" she inquired, feeling, in the midst of her demur, that she should like much the gentle lady before her for a mistress.

"The only maid-servant. We keep a man who attends on papa and waits at table; he helps a good deal also in the kitchen, gets in coal, cleans the knives, and does similar work; and he generally answers the door. I do not think you would find the work too much."

"I think I might venture upon it," observed Judith, half in

soliloquy. "I once lived alone in a place. It was a gentleman's family, ma'am, too. I have never served in any other."

"We could not take a servant from a trades-person's family," returned Miss Chesney, who was deeply intrenched in her aristocratic prejudices. "Where is it that you say you are staying?"

"Number fourteen, Palace Street."

The sound struck on Miss Chesney's ear. "Number fourteen, Palace Street! Why! that must be close to the house where that sad tragedy has just taken place!"

"It is next door to it, ma'am," was Judith's answer.

All Jane Chesney's curiosity, all her marvel—and the best of us possess a good share of it—was aroused. "Did you see the young lady?" she inquired, quite eagerly, in her interest.

"I saw her several times; I was with her," was Judith's answer. "Mr. Stephen Grey could not get the nurse for her that he wished, and he was glad for me to be with her. He saw a great deal of me, ma'am, in my last place."

"It was a terrible thing," remarked Miss Chesney.

"It was an awful thing," said Judith, "wherever the blame may lie."

"That of course lies with Mr. Stephen Grey. There cannot be two opinions upon it."

"There *can*, ma'am," dissented Judith, in an impressive but respectful manner. "The jury—to go no further—were of a different opinion."

"I can understand their verdict; that is, understand the feeling which prompted them to return it. They did not like to bring in one against their fellow-townsman. Mr. Stephen has been so much respected in the town—as I hear; but we are little more than strangers in South Wennock."

"The case is altogether shrouded in mystery," said Judith, her own voice assuming unconsciously a tone of awe as she spoke. "It may come to light some time; I trust it will; whenever it does, I am sure it will be found that Mr. Stephen Grey was innocent."

"Do you think there was no mistake made in the medicine?"

"I feel persuaded there was none; that it was sent out from Mr. Stephen Grey's pure and proper. That the young lady was murdered,—as deliberately and wickedly murdered as any one ever was in this world—is my firm belief."

"By whom?"

"Ah, ma'am, there it all lies. That is the mystery that no one can fathom."

"Pompey has been saying that the people were talking when they came out of the inquest-room about a strange face on the stairs. They said that, but for that, the verdict might have gone against Mr. Stephen Grey."

This interposition came from Lucy Chesney; she had come silently into the room to look at the young woman who was seeking to live with them. The unfortunate affair in Palace Street, with its singular attendant circumstances, had excited all her interest—as such affairs will and do excite the interest of children—and every little additional detail was eagerly picked up by Lucy.

"What strange face was seen on the stairs?" exclaimed Jane Chesney, forgetting reproof in her surprise.

"Pompey says that Mr. Carlton saw a man with a strange face by the lady's bedroom door, just before her death, Jane."

Jane Chesney recalled her scattered senses. "Lucy, go up to papa," she said. "You should not have come in here without asking my permission, and you must not listen to all the idle tales brought home by Pompey."

The little girl went away in obedience, but half reluctantly, and Miss Chesney asked an explanation of Judith.

"When Mr. Carlton paid a visit to Mrs. Crane the night of the death, he thought, in leaving, that he saw a strange face on the stairs. Mr. Carlton now says he thinks it was only his fancy; but, ma'am, the coroner seemed to attach a great deal of importance to it. It is a pity," added Judith, again falling into soliloquy, "but all the circumstances could be brought into the full, clear light of day."

"*Seemed* to attach—you do not mean to say you were at the inquest!" exclaimed Miss Chesney.

"Yes, I was, ma'am. I have now come from it."

"I never heard of such a thing," cried Miss Chesney, recovering from her astonishment. It did sound very strange to her that a servant should attend a coroner's inquest for—as she supposed—pleasure.

"I was anxious to be there," explained Judith, "and I did not know but I might be called upon also as a witness. Though I had known the young lady only three or four days, ma'am, I had learnt to love her, and since she died I have hardly touched food. I could not have rested without hearing the evidence. And I am very glad I did hear it," she added, pointedly and emphatically. "My having been at the inquest will not make me the less good servant, ma'am."

Miss Chesney could not avoid a smile. Of course it would not, she answered; but the admission had sounded singular. However, she was not one to carry on gossip with a servant, and she quitted the subject for the other, which had brought Judith to the house.

The result of the interview was, that Judith's character was to be inquired into of her late mistress, and she was told to come again in a day or two for a final answer.

Miss Chesney, deep in thought, entered the drawing-room with a quiet step; and a choking sensation of pain, of dread, rushed over

her, for she fancied she saw her sister Laura's face lifted hurriedly from the shoulder of Mr. Carlton. She *must* have been deceived, she repeated to herself the next moment; yes, she must have been deceived.

But he was certainly standing there; they were standing together in the remaining rays of light that came in at the window. Jane Chesney's eyes suddenly opened to much that had hitherto been obscure—to Laura's fastidiousness latterly on the subject of her own dress, to the look of radiant happiness sometimes to be seen on her face, to her unaccountable restlessness when they were expecting the daily professional visit of the surgeon. Could it be possible that she was learning to love him?

Crossing the room, she stirred the fire into a blaze, rang for the lamp, and turned to Laura; speaking sharply.

"Why are you in the dark, Laura?"

"Because Pompey did not bring in the lamp, I suppose," returned Laura, in tones breathing somewhat of incipient defiance.

Jane pressed down her anger, her *fear*, and composed her manner to calmness. "I did not know you had returned, Mr. Carlton," she said. "Have you been here long?"

"Long enough to talk secrets to Laura," he laughingly replied, in a bold spirit. "And now I will go up to Captain Chesney."

He met the black servant carrying the lamp in as he quitted the room. Pompey was getting to be quite an old man now; he had been in Captain Chesney's service for many years.

"Leave the shutters for the present, Pompey," said his mistress; "come in again by-and-by. What is all this, Laura?" she added impatiently, as the man left the room.

Laura Chesney remained at the window, looking out into the darkness, her heart full of rebellion. "What is what?" she asked.

"What did Mr. Carlton mean—that he had been talking secrets to you?"

"It was a foolish remark to make."

"And he presumed to speak of you by your Christian name!"

"Did he?"

"*Did* he! Did you not notice it? Laura, I—I thought—I thought I saw your head leaning upon him," returned Jane, speaking as if the very utterance of the words choked her.

"You are fanciful," answered the younger sister. "You always were so."

Were the words spoken in subterfuge? Jane feared so. "Oh, Laura!" she exclaimed in agitation, "I have heard of young ladies allowing themselves to be on these familiar terms with men, receiving homage from them in their vanity, caresses even in their love! Surely nothing of the sort is arising between you and Mr. Carlton?"

Laura made no reply.

"Laura," continued Jane in a sharp, ringing tone of pain, "*do* you like him? Oh, take care what you are about! You know you could never marry Mr. Carlton."

"I do not tell you that I like him," faltered Laura, some of her courage beginning to forsake her. "But why could I not marry him?"

"Marry *him!* You! The daughter of Captain Chesney marry a common country apothecary! The niece——"

"There! don't go on, Jane; that's enough,"—and the young lady stamped her foot passionately.

"But I must speak. You are Miss Laura Chesney——"

"I tell you, Jane, I won't listen to it. I am tired of hearing who we are and what we are. What though we have great and grand connections,—do they do us any good? Does it bring plenty to our home?—does it bring us the amusement and society we have a right to expect? Jane! I am tired of it all. There are moments when I feel tempted to go and do as Clarice has done."

There was a long pause—a pause of pain; for Laura had alluded to the one painful subject of the Chesneys' later life. Jane at length broke the silence.

"It would be better for you, even that, than marrying Mr. Carlton," she said in a hushed voice. "Laura, were Mr. Carlton our equal, I could not see you marry him."

Laura turned from the window now, turned in her surprise. "Why?"

"I do not know how it is that I have taken so great a dislike to Mr. Carlton," continued Miss Chesney in a dreamy tone, not so much answering Laura as communing with herself. "Laura, I *cannot bear* Mr. Carlton. It seems to me that I would rather see you in your grave than united to him, were he the first match in England."

"But I ask you why."

"I cannot explain it. For one thing—but I don't care to speak of that. You have accused me before now, Laura, of taking prejudices without apparent reason; I have taken one against Mr. Carlton."

Laura tossed her head.

"But—in speaking with reference to yourself—we have been supposing for argument's sake that he was your equal," resumed Jane. "He is not so; he never can be; therefore we may let the subject drop."

"What were you going to urge against him, the 'one thing' that you would not speak of?" returned Laura.

"It may be as well not to mention it."

"But I shall be very much obliged to you to mention it, Jane. I think you ought to do so."

"Well then—but you will think me foolish—Mr. Carlton was so mixed up, and unfavourably, with that dreadful dream I had of Clarice on Monday night. I never liked Mr. Carlton, but since that night I seem to have had a horror of him. I cannot help this, Laura; I dare say it *is* very foolish; but—we cannot account for these things."

How foolish Laura Chesney thought it, the haughty contempt of her countenance fully told. She would not condescend to answer it; it was altogether beneath her notice; or she deemed it so.

Jane Chesney took her work-basket and sat down near the lamp. She was looking at some work, when a violent rapping overhead of Captain Chesney's stick was heard, and Lucy came flying downstairs and burst into the room.

"Oh, Jane!" she exclaimed, "Lady Oakburn's dead."

Jane dropped her work; Laura moved to the table, aroused to excitement.

"Dead!" repeated Jane. "And when she wrote to me last week she was so well!"

"Jane, Jane, you don't understand," said the child. "It is young Lady Oakburn; not our old aunt the dowager. And a little baby has died with her."

The rapping stick overhead had never ceased. Jane, recovering her scattered senses, ran upstairs, the others following her. Captain Chesney was on his couch, all turmoil and impatience, rapping incessantly; and Mr. Carlton sat near him, evidently at a loss to comprehend what caused the tumult. A shaded candle was on the table, but the blaze of the fire fell full on the surgeon's impassive face, curious and inquiring now. It appeared that he had been conversing with his patient when Lucy saw something in the *Times* newspaper, which was lying partly folded on the table, having only recently been brought in, and she read it out aloud to her father.

Captain Chesney lifted his stick and brought it down on the table after his own fashion, as they entered. "Take up that newspaper, Jane," he exclaimed, "and see what it is that Lucy has stumbled upon in the deaths."

Jane Chesney ran her eyes downwards from the top of the column and caught sight of something in the notice of births, which she read aloud.

"On the 12th instant, in South Audley Street, the Countess of Oakburn of a daughter."

Then in the deaths:—

"On the 14th instant, in South Audley Street, aged twenty-one, Maria, the beloved wife of the Earl of Oakburn."

"On the 14th instant, in South Audley Street, Clarice, the infant child of the Earl of Oakburn."

Jane's voice ceased, and the captain brought his stick on the floor with one melancholy thump, as did Uncle Toby his staff, in the colloquy with Corporal Trim.

"Gone!" uttered he. "The young wife gone before the old grandmother!"

"Did you know the parties, sir?" asked Mr. Carlton.

"Know them, sir!" returned the choleric captain, angry at having, as he deemed, so foolish a question put to him. "I ought to know them, for they are my blood relations."

"I was not aware of it," said Mr. Carlton.

"No, sir, perhaps you were not aware of it, but it's true, for all that. My father, sir, was the Honourable Frank Chesney, the second son of the ninth Earl of Oakburn and brother to the tenth earl; and the late earl, eleventh in succession, and father of the present earl, was my own cousin. It's a shame that it should be true," continued the captain, his stick noisily enforcing every other word: "a shame that I should be so near to the peerage of England, and yet be a poor half-pay navy captain! Merit goes for nothing in this world, and relationship goes for less. If the late earl had chosen to exert himself, I should have been an admiral long ago. There *have* been Admiral Chesneys who distinguished themselves in their day, and perhaps I should have made no exception," he concluded, with a violent accession of the stick accompaniment.

"They named the little child 'Clarice,' you see, papa," observed Jane, after a pause.

"As if the old dowager would let them name her anything else!" cried the captain. "You don't know the Dowager Countess of Oakburn, probably, Mr. Carlton; the present earl's grandmother?"

"No, sir, I do not."

"You have lost nothing. She is his grandmother, and my aunt; and of all the pig-headed, selfish, opinionated old women, she's the worst. When Jane was born"—nodding towards his daughter—"she says to me, 'You'll name her Clarice, Frank.' 'No, I won't,' I said, 'I shall call her by her mother's name,'—which was Jane. The same thing over again when Laura was born. 'You'll name *her* Clarice, Frank, and I'll stand godmother,' cries the countess. 'No, I won't,' I said, 'I shall name her after my sister Laura'—who had died. And then my lady and I had a lasting quarrel. Her own name's Clarice, you see. Yes! I am as near as that to the great Oakburns (who are as poor as church mice for their rank, all the whole lot), and I'm a half-pay captain, hard up for a shilling."

"Are there many standing between you and the title, sir?" asked Mr. Carlton.

"There's not one between me and the title," was the answer. "If the earl should die without children, I become Earl of Oakburn. What of that? He is a young man and I am an old one. He'll soon be marrying again, and getting direct heirs about him."

"I think if I were as near the British peerage as that, I should be speculating upon reaching it," said Mr. Carlton, with a genial laugh.

"And prove yourself a fool for your pains," retorted the blunt old sailor. "No; it's bad enough looking after old men's dead shoes; but it's worse looking after young ones'. I thank goodness I have not been idiot enough for that. I never, sir, allowed myself to glance at the possibility of becoming Earl of Oakburn; never. There was also another heir before me, the young earl's brother, Arthur Chesney, but he died. He got into a boating row at Cambridge a year or two back, and was drowned. Jane, you must see to the mourning."

Jane's heart sank with dismay at the prospect of the unexpected outlay. "Need we go to the expense, papa?" she faltered.

"Need we go to the expense!" roared the captain, his tongue and his stick going together, "what do you mean? You'd let the young countess go into her grave, and not put on mourning for her? You are out of your senses, Miss Chesney."

Mr. Carlton rose. He buttoned his coat over his slender and very gentlemanly figure, and contrived to whisper a word to Laura as he was departing.

"Be at ease, my darling. You *shall* be mine. Should they deny you to me, I will steal you from them."

Her hand was momentarily in his; his breath mingled with hers, so low had he bent to her; and Laura, with a crimson face and an apprehensive heart, glanced round to see if Jane was watching. But Jane had stooped over the gouty foot, in compliance with some sudden demand of Captain Chesney's.

CHAPTER XVII.

MR. CARLTON'S DEMAND.

A SHORT time went by, just a week or two, and the excitement caused by Mrs. Crane's death was beginning in some degree to subside. No discoveries had been made, no tidings obtained as to who she was or what she was; no light whatever had arisen to clear up the mystery of her death. It is just possible the police did not bestir themselves in the search so actively and perseveringly as they might have done; there were no distressed surviving relatives to

urge them on; there was no reward offered as a spur to exertion: and the poor young lady, who had arrived so strangely at South Wennock, apparently friendless and unknown, seemed likely to remain unknown for ever.

Things were progressing at the house of Captain Chesney. Progressing to an issue that not one of its inmates as yet dreamed of. The captain himself was *not* progressing. Through some imprudence of his own he had been thrown back in his recovery, and was still a prisoner to his room. The crape band placed on his hat for the young Countess of Oakburn had not yet been worn, and Jane Chesney was already beginning to be in trouble over the bills sent in for the mourning of herself and her sisters. The disagreeable servant Rhode had departed, and Judith Ford had entered in her place.

So far, so good. But that was not all.

Captain Chesney's relapse afforded an excuse for the more frequent visits of Mr. Carlton. The fractious invalid complacently set them down to anxiety for himself, and thought what an attentive doctor he possessed. Jane was half in doubt whether the two visits daily—the short one in the morning, snatched while Mr. Carlton was on his round to his other patients; the long, gossiping one in the evening—had their rise in any motive so praiseworthy: but as she saw no further reprehensible signs of intimacy between the surgeon and her sister, she hoped for the best.

Unknown to Jane Chesney, however, Mr. Carlton and Laura did contrive to snatch occasionally sundry stolen moments of interview. In one of these, Mr. Carlton told her that the time had come for his speaking out to Captain Chesney. His father, who had been—he emphatically said it—a bad father to him for years, who had turned a resolutely deaf ear to any mention of his son's possible marriage, who would never suffer a hint of such a future contingency to be mentioned in his presence, nay, who threatened to invoke all kinds of ill upon his head if he contracted one, had suddenly veered round to the opposite extreme. Nothing brings a bad or careless man to his senses sooner than to find himself struck down by unexpected or desperate sickness, where the grave is seen with its portals already opening. Such an illness had overtaken Mr. Carlton the elder, and perhaps had been the means of changing his policy. One thing it certainly effected: a reconciliation with his son. From his residence in the east of London, a handsome house in a bad district, where he lay, as he thought, dying, he sent forth a telegraphic summons to his son at South Wennock, as you have already heard; and though the immediate danger was soon over for the time, some of its penitential effects remained. Mr. Carlton urged marriage upon his son now, telling him it would keep him steady,

and he made him a present of a good sum towards setting up his house for the reception of a wife.

The money was only too welcome to Lewis Carlton. No one but himself knew how he had been pushed, how pinched and straitened. He paid certain debts with some of it, and the rest he appropriated to its legitimate purpose—decorating and embellishing his house inside. Many articles of new and costly furniture were ordered in; and Mr. Carlton spared no pains, no money, to make it comfortable for her whom he loved so passionately—Laura Chesney.

It never occurred to him that he could be eventually refused. A demur at first he thought there might be, for Laura had confessed to him how exacting her family was on the score of birth, and Mr. Carlton had no birth to boast of, hardly knew what the word meant. But if Laura had birth, he had a good home, a rising practice, and the expectation of money at his father's death; and he may be excused for believing that these advantages would finally weigh with Captain Chesney.

With Mr. Carlton, to determine upon a thing was to do it. He had no patience; he could not wait and watch his time; what he resolved to have, he must have at once. This acting upon impulse had cost him something in his life, and perhaps would do so again.

He did as he resolved. He spoke out boldly, and asked Captain Chesney for his daughter Laura. The captain received the offer—well, you had better hear how he received it.

It was proffered at an hour when Jane and Laura were out. Mr. Carlton had an instinctive conviction that Jane Chesney would be against him, and Laura had confirmed him in it; therefore he judged it well to speak when she was out of the way. The captain's consent gained, he could metaphorically snap his fingers at Miss Chesney. He had paid his morning visit to the captain, and then gone further up the hill to see other patients, but he was not long in doing so, and as he was returning he saw the two Miss Chesneys go out of the gate, in their black silk dresses, and turn toward the town. They did not see him. A moment's hesitation in his own mind, and Mr. Carlton entered. Lucy came looking from the drawing-room as he invaded the hall, and he went into the drawing-room with her, while Pompey went up to inquire if his master would allow Mr. Carlton five minutes' private conversation.

"Are you drawing?" Mr. Carlton asked, as he saw signs of employment on the table.

"Yes," replied Lucy. "I am very fond of drawing, especially landscapes. Jane draws beautifully, and she teaches me. Laura likes music better. See, I have to fill in these trees before Jane comes home; she set me the task."

"You won't half do it," said Mr. Carlton, looking down at the

cardboard at which Lucy was now working steadily. "You will want to run away to play, long before that's done."

"I may want, perhaps; but I shall not do it. I would not disobey Jane. Besides, it is my duty to attend to my studies."

"Do you always do your duty?" inquired the surgeon, with a smile.

"Not always, I'm afraid. But I try to do it. Mr. Carlton, I want to ask you something."

"Ask away, young lady," said he.

Lucy Chesney laid down her pencil, and turned her sweet, earnest eyes on Mr. Carlton; they were beaming just now with saddened light.

"Was it really true that that poor sick lady was poisoned wilfully?—that some wicked man put the prussic acid in the draught?"

How his mood changed! The question appeared to excite his ire, and an impatient word escaped him.

"What have I done now?" exclaimed Lucy in excessive wonder. "Ought I not to have asked it?"

"I beg your pardon, Miss Lucy," he said, recovering his equanimity. "The fact is, I have not had a moment's peace since the inquest. South Wennock has done nothing but din these questions into my ears. I think sometimes I shall be turned into prussic acid myself."

"But was it wilfully done?" persisted Lucy, forgetting the rebuff in her anxious curiosity.

"That question had better be asked of Mr. Stephen Grey: perhaps he can answer it. No, of course it was not wilfully done."

"And, Mr. Carlton, please tell me, have they found out whose face that was upon the stairs?"

A sudden shade arose to the face of Mr. Carlton, discernible even by Lucy. The child thought it looked like dread.

"That was all nonsense," said he. "There was no face there."

"The captain says Misser Doctor go up," interrupted the black servant, coming in with his broken English. And Mr. Carlton departed.

Captain Chesney was a prisoner still, as to his legs; they were raised on the rest. A table was on one side of him, bearing various articles that he might want, and his stick was at hand on the other.

"What are you back again for?" he asked with some abruptness.

"I have a petition to make to you, Captain Chesney," began the surgeon, as he took, uninvited, a chair opposite the invalid; and perhaps for the first time in his life Mr. Carlton may have been conscious of a nervousness of manner quite foreign to him. "I have been hoping to speak to you for many weeks, and the time has at length come when I trust I may do so without great presumption. Before I enter upon my immediate subject, you will allow me a

word of explanation as to who I am. My father is a medical man in London, in extensive practice; I am his only child, and expect at his death to inherit a considerable fortune. I think—I fear—that death will not be long delayed, and then I shall be what may be called a rich man."

"Sir," interrupted the plain-spoken sailor, "wherefore tell me this? Were your father Chancellor of the Exchequer, and could endow you with the country's revenues, it would be no business of mine."

A flush rose to the brow of Mr. Carlton.

"Permit me a moment yet, Captain Chesney, while I speak of myself. I am well established here; am getting into extensive practice—for the Greys are going down; and down they will go, after that fatal mistake of Mr. Stephen's. In a little time, sir, I expect to be netting a thousand a year."

"But what is it all to me?" wondered the captain. "I'm sure you're welcome to it."

"Even had I only that in prospect, it would not be so bad an income; but when my father's money is added to it, I shall hold my own with any one in Wennock. Captain Chesney, I want one to share this with me. I want you to give her to me. Your daughter."

Mr. Carlton spoke in a low tone of emotion, and it may be doubted whether the captain heard him aright. Certain it is that he made no reply, but stared at Mr. Carlton as if he had become moon-struck.

"I speak of Miss Laura Chesney," continued the surgeon. "Oh, sir, give her to me! I will be a loving husband to her. She shall want for nothing to make her happy that the most anxious care and tenderness can bestow."

Captain Chesney wondered whether he himself had gone mad, or whether Mr. Carlton had done so. He had a firm conviction that it must be one or the other. He no more believed it within the range of possibility that any common country practitioner should presume to aspire to an alliance with the aristocratic family of Chesney, than that he, the captain, should dare to aspire to one of the royal princesses. His stick trembled ominously, but did not as yet come down.

"WHAT did you say, sir?" he demanded, with set teeth.

"Sir, I love your daughter; I love Laura Chesney as I have never yet loved, and never shall love another. Will you suffer me to make her my wife?"

Down came the stick in all its thunder, and out roared the captain's voice as an accompaniment, shouting for Pompey. The black servant flew up, as if impelled by something behind him.

"Was massa ill?"

"Ill!" chafed the captain. "*He* is!" he added, pointing the

stick at Mr. Carlton. "He's mad, Pompey; gone stark staring mad: you've shut me up here with a mad fellow. Get him out of the house, somehow."

The bewildered Pompey stood in confusion. He knew his choleric master said anything that came uppermost, and he glanced at the calm face, the still, self-possessed bearing of Mr. Carlton; certainly he looked like anything but a madman.

Mr. Carlton rose, his manner haughty, his voice cold. "Captain Chesney, I am a gentleman; and my proposal to you at least required courtesy. Have the kindness to favour me with an intelligible answer."

"I'll be shot if you get any other answer from me. You *are* mad, sir; nobody but a fool or a madman would dream of such a thing as you have now been proposing. Do you know, sir, that my daughter is a CHESNEY?"

"And I am a Carlton. If the names were to be picked out in the Heralds' College, the one might prove equal, if not superior to the other."

"Why—goodness bless my soul!" retorted the amazed captain. "You—you are a common apothecary, sir—a dispenser of medicine! and *you* would aspire to a union with the Chesneys?"

"I am a member of the Royal College of Surgeons," angrily repeated Mr. Carlton, who was beginning to lose his temper.

"If you were the whole College of Surgeons rolled into one,—their head, their tail, and their middle,—you wouldn't dare to glance at my daughter, had you any sense of propriety within you. Do you mean to show this gentleman out, you rascal!" added the inflamed captain, menacing with his stick the head of the unhappy Pompey.

"Door open, Misser Doctor," cried Pompey. But Mr. Carlton motioned him away with a gesture of the hand.

"Captain Chesney, I have told you that I love your daughter; I have told you that my prospects are sufficiently assured to justify me in marrying. Once more I ask you—will you give her to me?"

"No, by Jove!" raved the captain, "I'd see your coffin walk first. Here—stop—listen to me; I'd rather see *her* in her coffin, than disgraced by contact with you. You wed Laura Chesney? Never, never."

"What if I tell you that her hopes—her life, I may almost say—are bound up in me?" cried Mr. Carlton in a low tone.

"What if I tell you that you are a bad and a wicked man?" shrieked the captain. "How dare you take advantage of your being called into my house professionally, to cast your covetous eye on any of my family? Was that gentlemanly, sir? was it the act of a man of honour? You confounded old idiot, standing there with your great goggle eyes, what possesses you to disobey me? Haven't I ordered you to show this—this person—to the door!"

The last two sentences, as the reader may divine, were addressed to the bewildered Pompey. Mr. Carlton's face wore a resolute expression just then. He took it with him, and stood before Captain Chesney, folding his arms.

"It is said in Scripture, that a woman shall leave father and mother, and cleave unto her husband. I would ask you a question, Captain Chesney. By what right, her affections being engaged, and my means suitable, do you deny me your daughter?"

"The right of power, sir," was the sarcastic retort. "And, now that I have answered your question, allow me to ask you one. By what right did you seek her affections? You came into my house with one ostensible object, and clandestinely availed yourself of your footing in it to pursue another! Sir, you had no right to do this, and I tell you that you are a sneak and a coward. Begone, Mr. Surgeon. Send me up your bill, when you get home, and never attempt to put your foot inside my door again, or to cast a thought to Miss Laura Chesney."

"That is easier said than done, Captain Chesney," concluded Mr. Carlton, but he did not turn to leave.

"Now, you black villain! the door, I say; and both of you may thank your stars that I am this day powerless, or your skins might learn what it is to beard a quarter-deck captain."

But Mr. Carlton was already out, and Pompey also. A good thing that they were, for the stick of the roused captain came flying through the air after them; whether meant for one or the other, or both, the sender best knew. It struck the door-post and fell clattering to the floor, adding another dent to the gold top, which already had so many dents in it—as the meek Pompey could testify.

Leaning against the door, shivering and sick, was Lucy Chesney. The noise in the chamber had attracted her notice, and she ran up, but stopped at the entrance, too terrified to enter. She touched the arm of Mr. Carlton.

"Oh, tell me what has happened? I heard Laura's name. What has she done?"

Mr. Carlton shook off her hand, and moved forward, buried in thought. Before he had descended more than a stair or two, his recollection apparently came to him, and he went back to the child.

"Don't be alarmed, my dear; it is nothing to tremble at. I made a proposition to Captain Chesney, and he forgot his good manners in answering it. It will be all right. Mind, I tell you that it will, and you may tell Laura so, from me. Forgive my having passed you rudely, Lucy; at that moment I was not myself."

He quitted the house, turned out at the gate, and there came face to face with the Miss Chesneys. Something that they intended to take to the town with them had been forgotten, and they were re-

turning for it. Mr. Carlton stood before them and raised his hat. Jane wondered at his presumption in stopping them.

"Can I speak a word with you apart?" he suddenly demanded of Laura.

She blushed violently, but after a moment's indecision would have stepped aside with him, had not Jane interposed.

"You can have nothing to say in private to Miss Laura Chesney that may not be said in public, Mr. Carlton. I must beg her to decline your request."

In direct defiance to her sister, Laura could not grant it. Mr. Carlton saw she could not, and his resolution was taken. He addressed Laura, allowing Miss Chesney to hear, but taking no more notice of her than if she was not by.

"I have been speaking to Captain Chesney. I have been asking him to allow me to address you, and he received my proposals as if they were an insult. He would not hear me make them, or listen to any explanation; he treated me as I should think no gentleman was ever treated before. Laura, I can now only depend upon you."

She stood before him, her whole face glowing; frightened, but happy.

"But Rome was not built in a day," added Mr. Carlton. "Ill as Captain Chesney has this day received me, I forgive him for your sake, and hope the time may come when he will be induced to listen to us. We must both strive to subdue his prejudices."

Jane moved a step forward. She knew what her own course would be, had the proposition been made to her, and she had little doubt it must have been her father's.

"Has my father forbidden you the house, sir?"

"He has. But, as I say, I and your sister must hope to subdue his prejudices. Miss Chesney," he added, seizing her unwilling hand, "do not you be against us. I cannot give up Laura."

"You say 'against us,'" returned Jane. "In making use of those words it would almost lead to a belief that my sister has an understanding with you in this matter. Is it so?"

"It is," replied Mr. Carlton in a deep tone; "the understanding of *love*. Miss Chesney, it is no child's affection that she and I entertain for each other; it is not one that can be readily put aside, even at the will of Captain Chesney. Will you aid us to overcome his opposition?"

"No," said Jane in a low but firm tone. "I am deeply grieved, deeply shocked, to hear you say this. What you are thinking of can never be."

"I see," said Mr. Carlton in cold accents: "you share Captain Chesney's prejudices against me. Miss Chesney—allow me to say it—they may yet be conquered. I tell you, I tell Laura in your

presence, that I will do all I can to subdue them; I will do all I can to win her, for mine she shall be. My darling"—and his voice changed to tenderness—"only be true to me! It is all I ask. I am not to be admitted again to your house; but I shall see you elsewhere, though it be but a chance meeting, such as this. Good morning, Miss Chesney."

He passed on towards the town, and a conviction of future trouble arose in Jane Chesney's heart as she gazed after him. But she never guessed how bitter that trouble was to be.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE FACE AGAIN.

A CONFLICT was going on in the mind of Laura Chesney. Two passions, bad and good, were at work there, each striving for the mastery.

Should it be obedience or disobedience? Should she bear on in the straight line of duty, and be obedient to her father, to all the notions of right in which she had been reared; or should she quit her home in defiance, quit it clandestinely, to become the wife of Mr. Carlton? Reader! It has indeed come to this,—grievous as it is to have to write it of a well-trained gentlewoman.

On the day that Mr. Carlton had asked for Laura, Captain Chesney commanded her before him. He did not spare her. Every reproach that the case seemed to demand was lavished upon her by the indignant captain; and he finally forbade her ever to give another thought to Mr. Carlton. The abuse he heaped upon the unconscious surgeon would have been something grand if spoken upon the boards of a theatre; it simply made Laura rebellious. He told her that, except in his professional capacity, he disliked Mr. Carlton, and that nothing in the world would ever induce him to admit the man to his family. And this he confirmed with sundry unnecessary words.

Laura retired, apparently acquiescent. Not to him did she dare show disobedience, and the captain concluded that the affair was settled and over. Whether Laura's rebellious feelings would have subsided afterwards into duty had she been left alone, it is impossible to say; but Mr. Carlton took every possible occasion of fostering them.

He did not want opportunity. Laura—careless, wilful, reprehensible Laura—had yielded to his persuasions of meeting him in secret. Evening after evening, at the twilight hour, unless unavoidably kept away by the exigencies of patients, was Mr. Carlton in the

dark grove of trees that skirted Captain Chesney's house; and Laura found no difficulty in joining him. The captain and Miss Chesney would as soon have suspected her of stealing out to meet a charged cannon as a gentleman, and Laura's movements were free and unwatched.

But it was not possible that this state of things could continue. Laura had not been reared to deceit, and she did feel ashamed of herself. She felt also something else—a fear of detection. Each evening, as she glided tremblingly into that grove, she protested with tears to Mr. Carlton that it must be the last: that she *dared* not come again. And suppose she made it the last, he answered, what then? were they to bid each other adieu for ever?

Ah, poor Laura Chesney's heart was only too much inclined to open to the specious argument he breathed into it—that there was only one way of ending satisfactorily the present unhappy state of things; that of flying with him. It took but a few days to accomplish—to convince her that it would be best for them in every way, and induce her to promise to consent. So long as she was Miss Laura Chesney, Captain Chesney's obstinacy would continue, he argued; but when once they were married, he would be easily brought to forgiveness. Mr. Carlton believed this when he said it. He believed that these loud, hot-tempered men, who were so fond of raging out, never bore malice long. Perhaps as a rule he was right, but to all rules there are exceptional cases. With many tears, with many sighs, with many qualms of self-reproach, Laura yielded her consent, and Mr. Carlton laid his plans, and communicated them to her. But for his having been forbidden the house, Laura might never have ventured upon the step; but to continue to steal out in fear and trembling to see him, she dared not; and to live without seeing him would have been the bitterest fate of all.

In the few days that had elapsed since the rupture between her father and lover, Laura Chesney seemed to have lived years. In her after-life, when she glanced back at this time, she asked herself whether it was indeed possible that only those few days, a fortnight at most, had passed over her head, during which she was making up her mind to leave her home with Mr. Carlton. Only a few days! to deliberate upon a step that must decide the destiny of her whole life!

But we must hasten on.

It was about a month subsequent to the death of Mrs. Crane, and the moon's rays were again gladdening the earth. The rays were weak and watery. Dark clouds passed frequently over the face of the sky, and sprinkling showers, threatening heavier rain, fell at intervals.

Gliding out of her father's door, by the servants' entrance, came

Laura Chesney. She wore a black silk dress, the mourning for Lady Oakburn, and a black shawl was thrown over her head and shoulders. She stepped swiftly down the narrow path which led from this entrance to the foot of the garden, and plunged in among the trees there. It was between eight and nine o'clock, and, but for this watery moon, it would have been quite dark. Laura was later than she had wished to be. Captain Chesney was about again now, and it had pleased him to keep tea waiting on the table, before he allowed Jane to make it. Laura sat in a fever of impatience. Was Mr. Carlton waiting for her?—and would he go away? Taking one cup of tea hastily, Laura declined more, and, saying she had a headache, quitted the room.

Unheeding of rain which began to fall, Laura plunged into the trees. Leaning against the trunk of one thicker than the rest, stood Mr. Carlton. Laura, who was in a state of continuous terror during these interviews, flew to him for shelter.

"Oh, Lewis, I feared you would be gone! I thought I should never get away to-night. Papa was reading the newspaper, and Jane would not make tea unless he told her. I dared not come away until it was made, because they would have been calling me to it."

"Only one night more, Laura, and then it will be over," was his soothing answer.

At least, he had meant it to soothe her. But the step she was about to take seemed to come before Laura then in all its naked and appalling sternness.

"I don't know that I can do it," she murmured, with a shiver. "It is an awful thing. Do you mind me, Lewis?—an awful thing."

"What is?" asked Mr. Carlton.

"To run away from my father's home. I have read of it in books, but I never knew any one who did it in real life. And now that the time is coming near, I cannot tell you how I seem to shrink from it. We have been brought up to be so obedient."

"Hush, Laura! You are falling into an unnecessarily grave view of this."

She did not answer aloud, but she began asking herself whether too grave a view could be taken of a daughter's leaving clandestinely her father's home. Laura's conscience was unusually alive to-night. A glimmer of the watery moon fell on her face through the trees, and Mr. Carlton saw how grave was its expression. He divined her thoughts, as by instinct, and answered them.

"Laura, believe me, you *can* take too grave a view of it. When a father is unreasonably despotic, a daughter is justified in breaking through her trammels. Surely you are not wavering! Laura, Laura! you will not be the one to frustrate our plans! you will not draw back from me at the last hour!"

She burst into tears. "No, I would not draw back from you," she sobbed. "But—I don't know how it is, I feel to-night frightened at everything; frightened above all at the unknown future."

Mr. Carlton did his best to reassure her. Loving arguments, all too specious; sophistries, whose falseness was lost in their sweetness, were poured into her ear. It was only the old story; one that has been enacted many a time before, that will be enacted many a time again: where inclination and conscience are at war, and the latter yields.

"I could not live without you," he passionately reiterated. "You must not draw back from me now."

It may be that she felt she could not live without him. She suffered herself to be soothed, to be satisfied. Gradually, one by one, her scruples melted away; and she discussed with him finally their plans for getting away undetected, unpursued. The time for their purposed flitting was drawing very near: four-and-twenty hours more would bring it.

But it grew late; time for Mr. Carlton to be away, and for Laura to be indoors again, lest she should be missed. Mr. Carlton, with many a last word and many another, at length quitted her. Laura remained for a few minutes where she was, to still the beating of her agitated heart, to live over again the sweet, stolen interview. Only a few hours, and, if all went well, she should belong to him for ever!

The shrubs and trees around afforded a safe shelter. It was pretty dry there, and she had suffered the shawl to fall from her shoulders, never heeding where. But now she turned to look for it, and just at that moment the moon burst from behind a cloud, and Laura looked up at its glitter through the leaves of the trees. It was brighter then than it had yet been that night.

Taking up the shawl, she had thrown it round her, when a cry escaped her lips, and every pulse in her beating heart stood still. There, amidst the trees, stood some one watching her; some one that certainly bore the form of a human being, but a strange one. It wriggled itself forward and came nearer: near enough to speak in a whisper, and be heard:

"Laura Chesney, what have you to do with Lewis Carlton?"

She stood paralyzed with fright, with awe, leaning against the trunk of a tree, and saying nothing: her hands clutching the shawl, her eyes dilated.

"Have nothing to do with Lewis Carlton," went on the voice. "If you care for your own happiness, perhaps your life, have nothing to do with him. Ask him what he did to Clarice. Ask him if he deals in poison."

With the faintest possible rustling, the figure and the voice died

away to her sight and hearing. Laura Chesney felt as if her own heart, almost her life, were dying with it.

Now it happened that Mr. Carlton, after letting himself out at the gate, remembered a word he had forgotten to say to Laura, touching those plans of theirs for the following evening. He had gone a few paces down the road when he thought of it; but he retraced his steps, put his hand over the gate, pressed the spring, and turned in again. Only a few yards from him, right in front of the path, enveloped in what looked like a travelling cloak and cap, stood a man, a stout, very short man—as it seemed to Mr. Carlton. He supposed it to be some traveller coming perhaps from a journey, who might have business at the house; he supposed he had passed in at the gate in the minute that had elapsed since he himself had passed out of it. Conscious that he was not upon Captain Chesney's premises on pursuits of the most honourable nature, the surgeon felt somewhat embarrassed. At that moment the stranger turned and raised his cap, and to Mr. Carlton's horror he saw beneath it the face he had seen once before.

It was the same face he had seen on the staircase in Palace Street, the night of his patient's death; the same severe face, with its intensely black whiskers, and its ghastly white skin. A creeping horror, as if the dead were about him, overspread Mr. Carlton; he knew not whether the figure before him was ghostly or human. He leaned his brow on his hand for one single instant to recover self-possession; and when he looked up, the figure was gone.

Gone where? Mr. Carlton could not say, could not think. That it had not come down the path was certain, because it must have brushed past him; and it was equally certain it had not gone on to the house, or it would not yet have been out of sight; neither was he disposed to think it had disappeared amidst the trees, for he had heard no sound of their being moved. He had hitherto considered himself a brave man, a man bolder than the common run, but he was strangely shaken now. The same undefined terror which had unnerved him that other night, unmanned him this. It was not a fear that he could grapple with. It was a vague, shadowy dread, perfectly undefined to his mind, partly indistinct; one moment presenting the semblance of a tangible fear, that might be run from or guarded against; the next, wearing to his conviction only the hues of a fanciful superstition. Never, in all his life, had Mr. Carlton believed in ghostly appearances; he would have been the first to laugh at and ridicule those who did believe in them; most singular, then, was it that the face he had seen that ill-fated night should have conjured up any superstitious fear in his mind of its being a visitant from the other world. It was singular that the same idea should arise, uncalled for, now.

With a face quite as ghastly as the one he had seen,—with shaken nerves that he strove in vain to steady,—with a sickening fear that ran through every fibre of his frame, Mr. Carlton stood still as death, taking a few moments' respite; and then he penetrated to the spot where he had left Laura Chesney. Not to her did he purpose breathing a syllable of what had passed. What then was his astonishment to find her dart up to him, clasp him tightly for protection, and burst into deep sobs of terror, a terror as great as his own!

"Laura, my love, what means this?"

"Oh, Lewis, did you see it? did you see it?" she sobbed. "That figure which has been here?"

Mr. Carlton's heart beat more violently than before; but still he would not betray that he knew anything.

"What figure, Laura?"

"I don't know; I don't know who or what it was. It was behind me, amidst the trees, and I saw it when I turned to look after my shawl. At the first moment I thought it was a woman; its voice sounded like a woman's; but afterwards I thought it was a man. I don't know which it was."

"Its voice!" repeated Mr. Carlton. "Did it speak?"

"It spoke, and that was the worst; it warned me against you. Otherwise I might have thought it some curious passer-by, who had heard us speaking, and came intruding in at the gate to look. Oh, Lewis!" she added, with a burst of agitation that almost shook Mr. Carlton as well as herself, "it is not true, is it? Lewis! Lewis!"

Her emotion was so excessive that she lost all self-control, all recollection of the necessity for secrecy. Another fear attacked Mr. Carlton—that they might be betrayed.

"Hush, hush!" he whispered. "Be calm, and tell me what you mean. Is what true?"

"It—I say 'it,' because I don't know whether it was a man or a woman—it warned me against you," panted Laura. "It told me that I must have nothing to do with Lewis Carlton; that if I valued my own happiness, perhaps my life, I should not."

"Some envious fool who has penetrated our secret, and who would step between us," interrupted Mr. Carlton in a tone of bitter scorn.

"Hear me out," she continued. "It told me to ask you what you had done with Clarice: to ask if you dealt in poison."

Mr. Carlton stood as one transfixed—as one confounded. "What Clarice?" he presently asked. "Who is Clarice?"

"I don't know," said Laura Chesney, her sobs subsiding into a wail. "Do you know any one of the name?"

"I do not know any Clarice in the world," he answered.

"But about the poison?" shivered Laura: "what could the words mean? 'Ask him if he deals in poison!'"

"I suppose they meant 'deals in drugs,'" was the answer. "A medical man, in general practice, must have to do with them."

There was something in Mr. Carlton's tone that frightened Laura worse than anything that had gone before. She started away to gaze at him. He was looking forward with a vacant stare, as if he had lost all consciousness of the present.

"Was it a pale face, Laura, with black whiskers?" he presently asked.

"I could see nothing distinctly, except that the face was ashy pale—or perhaps it only looked so in the moonlight. Why? Have you seen it?"

"I believe I have seen it twice," returned Mr. Carlton. He spoke in a dreamy tone of self-communing, quite as if he had forgotten that any one was present; and indeed it seemed that he had lost self-control just as much as Laura had lost it. "I saw it outside that room the night of the death," he continued, "and I saw it again this minute as I was coming back to you."

The particular information, and the associations it conjured up, did not tend to reassure Miss Laura Chesney.

"The face you saw outside the lady's room in Palace Street?" she said, with a faint shriek. "It never could be *that* face," she added, relapsing into another fit of trembling. "What should bring that face here!"

"I know not," cried Mr. Carlton; and it seemed that he was trembling also. "I am not sure, Laura, that it is either man or woman; I am not sure but it is a ghostly apparition."

"Where did you see it? Where did it go to?"

"I saw it in the path, but I did not see where it went. It seemed to vanish. It is either that, or—or—some base villain, some sneaking spy, who steals into houses for his own wicked purposes, and deserves the halter. What should bring him here? here on your father's premises. Was he dodging my steps? or yours?"

"Lewis, whose *was* the face, that night?"

"I would give half my allotted life to know."

"There was a suspicion that *he* poisoned the draught. I am sure I heard so."

"Just as he would poison the happiness of our lives," exclaimed Mr. Carlton in agitation:—"as he would have poisoned your mind against me. Laura, you must choose between me and him; between his insidious falsehoods and my love."

"Do not speak in that way," she passionately uttered; "the whole world could not turn me against you. Oh, Lewis, my best beloved,

soon to be my husband, do not be angry with me that I repeated his words; had I kept them to brood over alone, they would only have rankled in my heart."

"Angry with you," he murmured, "no, no. I am not angry with you. I am angry with—with that wicked one, who would have tried to separate us. One more night and day, my love, and then we may defy him and all the world."

Laura stole back to the house by the path she had come, the side-path leading to the kitchen. Mr. Carlton stood and watched her safely indoors, and then departed on his way home. The garden, for all that could be seen of it, was perfectly free from intruders then, and Mr. Carlton could only believe it to be so.

But as he went down the road, lying so fanciful and still—still in the calm night, in its freedom at that hour from people, fanciful with its quaint patches of light and shade—Mr. Carlton walked as though he feared an enemy at every turn. Now he peered before him, now he glanced over his shoulder behind him, now he half turned to see what might be by his side; and once, as an old hare, lurking in the hedge, sprang out before him and scudded to the opposite field, he positively started from it with a sudden cry. Strangely unnerved that night was Mr. Carlton.

And Laura, after all, did not escape detection. It happened, when tea had been removed from the drawing-room, that Miss Chesney wanted an embroidery pattern, and went to Laura's bedroom to ask her for it. Laura was not there: and Jane, fancying she heard a movement overhead, turned to the foot of the upper stairs, and called.

It was not Laura who was up there, but the maid, Judith. She came out of her chamber, looked down, and saw her mistress standing below.

"Did you speak, ma'am?"

"I called to Miss Laura, Judith. Is she upstairs?"

The only room in which Laura was likely to be, if she was upstairs, was the one occupied by Jane. Jane Chesney, ever self-denying, had given up the best lower rooms to her father and Laura, herself and Lucy sleeping above. Judith went and looked inside the chamber.

"No, ma'am, Miss Laura is not here. I'm sure she has not come upstairs, or I should have heard her."

Jane called again, but there was no answer. She looked everywhere she could think of, and at last went into the kitchen. Pompey was there alone.

"Pompey, do you know where Miss Laura is?"

Pompey was, as the saying runs, taken to. He had had his eyes and ears open this last week or two, and had not been unconscious of Miss Laura's stolen interviews outside the house in the dusk of

evening. Pompey had no idea of making mischief; old Pompey was fond of pretty Miss Laura, and had kept the secret as closely as she could have kept it: but, on the other hand, Pompey had no idea, could have no idea, of denying any information demanded of him by his mistress, Miss Chesney. So Pompey stood and stared in bewildered indecision, but never spoke.

"I ask you, Pompey, if you know where Miss Laura is," repeated Jane, certain anxieties touching Laura taking sudden possession of her and rendering her voice sharp. "Why do you not answer me?"

"She there, missee," replied Pompey, at length, pointing to the garden. "She not catch cold; she got great big black shawl over her."

"Who is with her? Pompey, I ask you who is with her?"

She spoke with quiet authority, though she had laid her hand on her heart to still its tumultuous beating; authority that might not be disputed by poor Pompey.

"I think it Misser Doctor. But she no stay very long with him, missee; she never does."

Jane Chesney leaned against the dresser, feeling as if an avalanche had fallen and crushed her; feeling that if an avalanche fell and crushed the house for ever, it would be more tolerable than this disgrace which had fallen upon it. In that moment there was a slight rustle of silk in the passage; it whirled by the kitchen door, and was lost on the floor above; and Jane knew that Laura had come in and taken shelter in her room.

Come in from the cladestine meeting with Mr. Carlton, the surgeon; and the words of Pompey seemed to imply that these meetings were not infrequent! Jane Chesney turned sick at heart. The disgrace was keen.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE LETTERS.

An incident occurred the following morning to cause some surprise at the house of Captain Chesney. When Pompey brought in the letters he presented them to Jane, as was customary. There were three. The first was addressed to Captain Chesney, and Jane immediately handed it to him across the breakfast-table; the second was addressed to herself; and the third bore the superscription, "The Right Honourable the Earl of Oakburn."

It was not a pleasant morning, for the rain was pattering against the window panes. The breakfast-table was laid near the window in the drawing-room, where the captain, in his despotic will, chose

that they should breakfast. He had taken a liking to the room; to its pretty glass windows that opened to the lawn.

Captain Chesney unsealed his letter the moment it was handed to him, and became absorbed in its contents. Jane kept glancing at the one addressed to Lord Oakburn, but she would not interrupt her father to speak of it. When he had finished his letter, he looked up.

"Are both those for you, Jane?"

"Not both, papa. One is directed to Lord Oakburn. See. I cannot make out why it should have been sent here."

Captain Chesney stretched out his hand for the letter, and turned it about to regard it, after the usual manner of people when a letter puzzles them.

"Yes, it is for him, sure enough. 'The Right Honourable the Earl of Oakburn, Cedar Lodge, the Rise, South Wennock,'" continued he, reading the full superscription aloud. "He must be coming here, Jane."

"I suppose he must, papa. It is the only conclusion I can come to."

"Very condescending of him, I'm sure," growled the captain. "It's an honour he has not accorded me since he was at Eton. What is bringing him here, I wonder? Wants change of scene perhaps."

Jane took alarm. "You don't think he can be coming to stay, papa? We have nothing fitting to receive him; no establishment, no accommodation. He cannot surely be coming to stay with us!"

"If he comes he must take things as he finds them. I shall not put myself out of the way, neither need you. 'Not able to do it, my lord,' I shall say to him; 'Frank Chesney's too poor; had his family bestirred themselves, old Frank might have carried his head a notch higher. All you need do, Jane, is to see that he has a shake-down, a hammock slung for him somewhere. I suppose that can be managed; there's the spare room off mine; and for the rest, let him take what he finds."

"Still I can hardly understand why he should be coming," resumed Jane, after a pause. "He——"

"Is he in London, or at Chesney Oaks?" interrupted Lucy, looking up from her bread and milk.

"At Chesney Oaks, my dear," said Jane. "He went down a month ago, when his poor young wife was buried, and I think he has remained there."

"Whew!" interposed the captain, "I can understand it. He is cutting across the country from Chesney Oaks to Great Wennock for a day or two on some political business, and so intends to make a convenience of my house to stay in and to have his letters sent to. *Very* condescending of him indeed!"

"Papa," said Lucy somewhat anxiously, "don't you like Lord Oakburn?"

"Well—yes, I like *him* well enough, what I know of him; but I hold that I had great grievances against his father. What's the post-mark, Jane?"

Jane Chesney turned the letter over, and made out the mark to be "Pembury." It was the post-town in the vicinity of Lord Oakburn's seat, Chesney Oaks.

"He must have started then, I should think," remarked Jane. "And this has been sent after him."

"How did he know our address here, papa?" asked Lucy.

"How did he know our address here!" repeated the captain in choler. "What should hinder his knowing it? Do I live with my head under a bushel, pray? When I changed from Plymouth to this neighbourhood, the family received intimation of it; and didn't I write to the earl the other day when his wife died? Was I not asked to the funeral, little stupid; and couldn't go because of that confounded gout?"

"Lucy's only a child, papa," soothingly interposed Jane. "She does not reflect before speaking."

"Then she ought to do so," said the captain, "and not show herself a simpleton. He'll be wanting another wife soon, I suppose, so you had better look out, Miss Laura, and set your cap at him when he comes. You wouldn't make a bad countess."

The grim sailor spoke in jest. To give him his due, he was not capable of scheming for his daughters in any way. Laura, however, seemed to take the words in earnest. She had sat silent over her nearly untasted breakfast, her face bent; but it was lifted now, flushing with a vivid crimson. Captain Chesney laughed; he thought his random shaft must have struck home to her vanity, exciting visions of a peeress's coronet, pleasing as they were foolish. But Jane, who had also noticed the blush, attributed it to a different cause, and one that pleased her not.

"Papa," resumed Lucy, venturing on another question, "how far is it from this to Chesney Oaks?"

"About thirty miles, little mouse."

"I think I ought to have holiday from my lessons to-day, as Lord Oakburn is coming," continued the child, glancing at Jane.

"Wait for that until he does come," said the captain. "He's as uncertain as the wind; all young men are; and it may be days before he gets here. He may"—the captain drew up his head at the thought—"he *may* be coming to consult me on business matters connected with the estate, for I am—yes, I am—the next heir, now he's a single man again. Not that I shall ever inherit; he is twenty-five and I am fifty-nine. Have you a headache this morning, Laura?"

Again came the rush of red to her face. What self-conscious feeling induced it? "No, not this morning, papa. Why?"

"You are as silent and look as *down* as if you had fifty headaches. Jane," concluded the captain, as he rose, "we must have soup to-day, in case he arrives."

Jane acquiesced, with a sigh. Lord Oakburn's anticipated visit was only an additional care to the many household troubles that oppressed her.

Breakfast over, the captain strolled out. There was a lull in the storm, and the rain had momentarily ceased. He looked up at the skies with his experienced sailor's eye, and saw that it had not ceased for long. So he did not go beyond the garden, but went strolling about that.

Laura had departed immediately to her room. Jane placed the letter for Lord Oakburn on the mantel-piece and opened the one addressed to herself, which she had not done at breakfast. As she was reading it Captain Chesney came in to ask her for a piece of string to tie up some bush in the garden.

"Is your letter from——"

The captain stopped without concluding the sentence, stopped abruptly, and Jane's heart fluttered. She believed he had been going to say "from Clarice," and she felt thankful that the long barrier of silence observed by her father in regard to that name should at length be broken. Nothing of the sort, however, the captain's obstinacy was unconquerable.

"It is only from Plymouth, papa."

"Oh," said the captain indifferently; and, taking the string which she had found for him, he moved away, all unconscious that even in that slight incident she was sparing him pain in her love and duty. The letter was from a creditor at Plymouth, pressing for money on account of some long-standing debt.

Jane settled Lucy to her lessons, and then went up to her sister's room. Laura had flung herself upon the bed, and lay there with her hands pressed to her temples. It may be questioned which of the two sisters had passed the most unhappy night. The discovery of the previous evening had been one of dire dismay to Jane Chesney, and she had lain awake in her distress, wondering how it was to end, wondering whether Laura *could* be recalled to a sense of what was right. In her own simple rectitude of feeling, Jane looked on the affair, on Laura's having allowed herself to meet in secret Mr. Carlton, almost as a crime, certainly as a heavy disgrace. And Laura? Laura could only regard with shrinking fear the step she was about to take. She had tossed on her uneasy bed, asking herself whether she should not yet draw back from it. Even now the conflict was not over, and she lay there in dire perplexity and distress.

"Laura," began Jane in low tones, as she entered, "this must end."

Laura sprang off the bed, startled and vexed at having been found there. "I feel tired this morning," she stammered, with a lame attempt at apology; "I did not sleep well last night."

"I say, Laura, that this must end," continued Jane, too agitated with grief to set about her task in any artistic manner. "You have permitted yourself to meet in secret that man—the surgeon, Carlton. Oh, Laura! what strange infatuation can have come over you?"

Laura laid her hand upon her chest to still its heavy beating. Found out! In her dismay and perplexity it seemed to her that there was nothing for it but *denial*. And she stooped to it.

"Who says I have? What will you accuse me of next, Jane?"

"Hush, Laura! falsehood will not mend wrong-doing. Evening after evening you steal out to meet him. Last night I wanted you, and I heard you were outside. I saw you come in, Laura, with the shawl over your head. Laura, my dearest sister, I do not wish to speak harshly, but surely you cannot have reflected on how great is the degradation!"

Strange to say, the effect of the discovery was to harden her. With every moment, now that the first startling shock had passed, Laura's spirit grew more defiant. She made no reply to her sister.

"I speak only for your own sake," pleaded Jane. "It is for your sake I beg you to break off all intimacy with Mr. Carlton. Laura, I feel certain that he is not the man to make you happy, even were attendant circumstances favourable to it."

"It is a strange prejudice that you have taken against Mr. Carlton!" resentfully spoke Laura.

"I am not singular in it; papa dislikes him also. But, Laura, answer me a question: what end do you, can you, propose to yourself in this intimacy with him?"

Laura coloured, hesitated, and then took courage to speak out. But the answer was partly evasive.

"Mr. Carlton speaks of marriage. In time, when all your prejudices shall be overcome."

"Do not cherish it, do not glance at it," said Jane with emotion. "Our objections to Mr. Carlton never can be overcome. And I tell you that he would not make you happy."

"We must see—wait and see. If the worst comes to the worst, and every one remains obdurate, we must then—we must then—join common cause against you for ourselves."

Laura spoke with agitation, but her agitation was as nothing compared to that which seized upon Jane at the words. It was impossible for her to mistake their hidden meaning. Her lips were white, her throat was working, and she held her sister's hands in hers.

"You do not know what you say. Never so speak again; you would not, were you to weigh your words. I pray you—Laura, by the remembrance of our dead mother I pray you—never suffer so mistaken a thought to enter your mind, as that of quitting clandestinely your father's house to become a wife. A marriage entered upon in disobedience and defiance could not prosper. Laura, I don't think you are happy."

Laura burst into a flood of hysterical tears and laid her face down upon the dressing-table almost in abandonment. Never had the conflict between right and wrong been so great as at that moment. Which should she give up? her father, her friends, her duty?—or him whom she loved with that all-impassioned love?

Jane stooped to kiss her. "Let it end from this day," she whispered. "Do not again forget what is due to yourself and to us by stealing out of the house for any secret interview. It is not seemly; it is not right."

Jane quitted the room; it was best to leave Laura's sobs to subside alone. As she descended the stairs and passed the staircase window, she saw her father coming up one of the garden paths. Almost at the same moment, a blow, a crash of glass, and a shriek of terror, sounded from below. Jane flew down the stairs; Judith rushed forth from the kitchen; and Pompey, his great eyes glaring, emerged from some peculiar sanctum of his own, sacred to knives and boots. They stared at each other in the hall.

"Who is it?" exclaimed Jane. "What has happened? I thought it must be you, Pompey, come to harm amidst the bottles."

"Don't stand there asking who it is," burst from the choleric captain, as he came flinging into the hall. "It's Lucy. She has fallen against the drawing-room window, and perhaps killed herself"

They ran to the drawing-room. Lucy lay on the carpet close to the window, which opened, you know, on the ground. In running carelessly towards it to say something to her father, her foot had slipped and she fell with her arms against the window, breaking two of its panes. The palm of one hand was cut, and the inside of the other wrist. They raised her and placed her in a chair, but the wrist bled dreadfully. Judith grew pale.

"There may be an artery divided, sir," she whispered to her master. "If so, she may bleed to death."

"You rascal, to stand there gaping when the child's dying!" cried the hot captain. "Go along and get help."

"Is it Misser Carlton I am to get?" asked the unlucky Pompey.

Down came the captain's stick within an inch of Pompey's head, and Laura, dismayed at the disturbance, came in just in time to hear the captain's answer.

"That villain Carlton! No, sir, not if the whole house were

dying together. Get Mr. Grey here, you useless animal. Not the one who poisoned the lady's draught, sir, do you hear? He shouldn't come within a mile of me. Find the other one, and be quick over it."

Poor, affectionate, well-meaning Pompey would certainly have been as quick as his best legs allowed him, but he was saved the trouble of using them. At the very instant they were speaking, Mr. John Grey was seen driving past in his gig. Judith ran out.

The groom heard her call, and pulled up, and Mr. Grey hastened in with Judith when he found what was the matter. In ten minutes the wounds were washed and strapped together with plaster. Lucy had cried very much with terror.

"Shall I die? Shall I die?" she asked of Mr. Grey, her little heart beating, her hands trembling.

"No, of course not," he replied. "What made you think of that?"

"I heard them talk about my dying; I am sure I did," sobbed Lucy, who was of an excitable and also of a timid temperament. "I heard them say that perhaps the artery was divided; does that kill people?"

"Not always," said Mr. Grey. "Keep your hands still, like a brave little girl."

"Are you sure I shall not die?"

"Quite sure; you are not in any danger. Look here," he added, turning up his coat-sleeve and wristband, and exhibiting his wrist to Lucy, while the others stood around, the captain in rather a subdued mood. "Do you see that scar?"

"Yes," was Lucy's answer.

"Well, once, when I was younger than you, I fell against a window just as you have done, and cut my wrist. There was danger in my case, and shall I tell you why?—the cut divided the artery. Though who made you so wise about arteries," added Mr. Grey, smiling, "I don't know. But you see, Miss Lucy—I think I heard them call you Lucy, and I like the name, it was my mother's—you see, where there is great danger there is generally great help. My father, a surgeon, was in the room when I did it: he took up the artery immediately, and the danger was past. Now, with this foolish little hurt of yours, although the strappings of diachylon look formidable, there has not been any danger, for the artery is not touched. Do you understand me?"

"Yes," replied Lucy, "and I believe you. I shall not be afraid now. Shall you come and see me again?"

"I will come in this afternoon just to see that the strappings remain in their places. And now, good-bye, and be sure you keep your hands still."

"I think there must be holiday after this," said Jane, with a smile.

"Oh, decidedly holiday," returned Mr. Grey, nodding pleasantly to Lucy. "Nursing to-day, lessons to-morrow."

Captain Chesney went out with him, and linked his arm within his. A rare condescension for the captain, and one that proved he had taken a fancy to Mr. Grey.

"She will do well, Captain Chesney, and I am glad I happened to be passing. It might have been an awkward accident."

"Sir, I thank you," said the captain; "and, sir, I see that you are a gentleman, and a man to be esteemed. And I can only regret one thing."

"What is that?" inquired Mr. Grey.

"That I ever took up with that fool of a Carlton. I dislike him, sir, and he shall never darken my doors again: he has proved *himself* anything but a gentleman. He's not fit to tie your shoes, socially, Mr. Grey, I can tell you that; and I don't suppose he is, professionally."

John Grey laughed, said a word to the captain to set him right as to Mr. Carlton's professional skill, which was really superior, ascended his gig in the pelting rain, and drove away.

The day went on. The evening post brought another letter for the Earl of Oakburn, though the day had failed to bring the earl himself. They dined at five, as usual, and afterwards Captain Chesney went into the town to meet the omnibus from Great Wennock, thinking it might possibly bring the earl, or news of him. It was after his departure that this second letter arrived, and Jane saw that it bore the London post-mark. Mr. John Grey, who had not been able to get up before, called in towards dusk.

As he stood at the table, talking to Jane, Lucy sitting in an easy-chair at the fire, his eye happened to fall on the letter that lay there, directed to the Earl of Oakburn.

"Do you know the earl?" he exclaimed, the remark appearing to escape him involuntarily.

"Yes," replied Jane; "we are related to him."

"Then perhaps you can tell me how he is?"

"I suppose he is well. We have been expecting him here all day."

"Expecting him here all day!" repeated Mr. Grey in an accent of astonishment. "I beg your pardon, Miss Chesney; I believe I cannot have caught your meaning."

"We have been expecting Lord Oakburn here since this morning," resumed Jane, "and we still expect him here to sleep. This letter and another have come to await him."

"You must, I fancy, be labouring under an error," returned Mr. Grey, in tones that seemed to say he did not fully comprehend Miss Chesney. "Lord Oakburn is dangerously ill; ill almost to death. Two days ago, very slight hopes indeed were entertained of him."

"What is the matter with him?" exclaimed Jane, thinking that the letters must contradict Mr. Grey's assertion. "Is he at Chesney Oaks?"

"He is lying at Chesney Oaks, ill of typhus fever. I know it in this way. The day before yesterday I had to go fifteen miles from this, to meet a physician from Pembury: we were to meet half-way. He did not come, but sent a friend, another medical man, who explained to me that the first was detained by the alarming illness of Lord Oakburn. He has been staying at Chesney Oaks since the funeral of the countess, went into a house where the fever was raging, and caught it. On the day I met this gentleman, he told me that a few hours would probably terminate his life."

Jane was silent, silent from positive bewilderment. Lucy spoke up from her chair.

"But, Mr. Grey, if Lord Oakburn should not be coming, why should he have his letters sent here?" Lucy felt disappointed: she had been anticipating great pleasure from the visit of Lord Oakburn.

"That is what I am thinking about," said Jane. "It is not only one letter, it is two; the one is from Pembury, the other from London. Unless Lord Oakburn should be intending to come here, why, as Lucy says, should letters be sent to meet him?"

"You may rely upon it that the Lord Oakburn who was lying ill at Chesney Oaks is not intending to come here at present, Miss Chesney. Probably you may know the next heir?"

"Papa is the next heir," said Jane.

"Captain Chesney is the next heir to the earldom of Oakburn?" quickly repeated Mr. Grey.

"Yes, he is."

"Then, my dear young lady, it is explained, I fear," returned Mr. Grey, after a grave pause. "Rely upon it, the young earl is dead: and that these letters are addressed to your father as Earl of Oakburn."

CHAPTER XX.

DISAPPEARANCE.

JANE CHESNEY sat in the darkening twilight gazing at the two letters which had caused them so much speculation. The conviction was gradually forcing itself upon her, that the view taken of the case by Mr. John Grey was the only one that offered any reasonable solution to the mystery; for if the young Earl of Oakburn was lying ill of fever at Chesney Oaks, it was out of the range of probability to suppose that letters would be sent to him to Captain Chesney's house at South Wennock.

Lucy's voice broke the stillness of the long pause that had followed on Mr. Grey's departure. The little girl, gifted with much sensitive feeling, had not liked to speak before, and even now her tones were low and timid.

"Do you think it can be true, Jane—that papa is Earl of Oakburn?"

"I—I think it must be so, Lucy. I cannot see that the coming of these letters here can mean anything else."

Lucy rose from her low seat by the fire, and was going to the door. "I'll go and tell Laura," she said; but Jane drew her back again.

"Not yet, Lucy. Let us be sure that it is true first. Somehow I do not like to speculate upon it. It is so sad, it is so grievously sad for the young earl to have died like this—if he has died."

Lucy sat down again, disappointed. She had all a child's love of imparting marvellous news. But Laura would be coming down directly, she supposed, and then Jane would no doubt tell her.

Jane sat on in silence. She was possessed of extreme right feeling; she had no selfishness, was just in her regard for others, and she did not like to dwell upon the probability of this being true—or, as she had phrased it, to speculate upon it. If Lord Oakburn was dead, had been cut off thus early, none would feel more genuine regret for him than Jane. And yet, in spite of this, in spite of herself, certain thoughts intruded themselves and would not be driven back. No more privations, no more pinching, no more care; no more dread of that horrible prison for one whom she so loved, which had been ever present to her mind, a shadow and a dread. Strive as she would, she could not wholly drive these thoughts from her brain; she *could not* do it; and yet she almost hated and despised herself for their being there.

By-and-by, just as Pompey brought in the lamp, Captain Chesney's step was heard on the wet gravel. The rain ever since the morning had been incessant, drenching; but it had ceased now.

"I can't get any news of Oakburn," said the captain, when he came in. "The omnibus brought no passengers at all to-night. What's that, Jane? Another letter for him? Well, it's strange that he should not be here to meet them."

"Papa," said Jane, her pulses beating at what she had to say, "I fear we may have been under a mistake in expecting him at all. Mr. Grey has been here since you went out, and he says Lord Oakburn was lying at Chesney Oaks two days ago, dangerously ill of typhus fever; it was feared then that he had not many hours to live. Mr. Grey thinks it certain that these two letters are for you."

"For me!" repeated the puzzled captain, not having discerned the drift of the argument.

"Yes, papa," replied Jane, bending her head and speaking in very low tones. "For you, as Earl of Oakburn."

Captain Chesney stared at Jane, and then made her repeat exactly what Mr. Grey had said. It subdued him greatly. He was as unselfish as Jane, and he thought of the young earl's fate, not of his own advancement.

"I'll risk it, Jane, and open one of the letters," he said. "If—if it should be all right, why, the poor fellow will forgive me; he was always good-natured. I'll just tell him how it happened, and why I did it. Give me the one that came this morning."

Jane selected the morning's letter, and Captain Chesney opened it. He ran his eyes over its contents, standing by the lamp to do so, and then he sat down in a very humble fashion and in deep silence.

"It's true, Jane," he presently said, with something very like a sob. "The poor lad is gone, and I am Earl of Oakburn."

The letter was from the steward at Chesney Oaks. He wrote to acquaint the new earl of his young master's death, and to request his immediate presence at Chesney Oaks. The earl (as we must henceforth call Captain Chesney) flung it on the table in a momentary access of his customary choler.

"Why didn't the simpleton write to me in my own name?" he exclaimed. "But that steward always was wanting in common sense. Give me the other letter, Jane."

The other letter proved to be from the lawyers in London, solicitors for many years to the Oakburn family. They were offering their services to the new peer.

The new peer seemed to have his work cut out for him. Of course the first obvious step was to depart for Chesney Oaks. With his characteristic impulse, he started up to go; then and there; without the loss of a minute.

"I can't wait, Jane. What do you say?—stop for tea? Tea! What other rubbish would you like me to stop for? If I can get a gig at the Lion, I may catch the cross-train at Great Wennock. Dead! The poor fellow dead, and none of his kith and kin near him!"

"But, papa, you must take a carpet-bag with you? You will want——"

"I shall take nothing with me," interrupted the earl, catching up his glasses, and buttoning up his coat in a desperate hurry. "You send Pompey after me in the morning to Chesney Oaks with a shirt and my shaving-tackle. There! there! I have not a moment to lose, Jane. One kiss apiece, girls, and then—where's Laura?"

Lucy rushed out of the room, calling "Laura, Laura!" The captain hastened after her, as well as stiffness left by the gout permitted him. He caught up his hat and cloak as he passed through the hall.

"Never mind her, Lucy, I can't wait; she's gone to sleep, I should

think. Give her a kiss for me, and ask her how she likes being my Lady Laura."

It all seemed to pass in a minute, before Jane had time to collect her bewildered senses. She said something to him about the danger there might be of his catching the fever, but he was deaf to it all, and walked down the garden path, fastening his cloak. Jane knew how useless it would be to repeat her words, and she stood at the open door with Lucy, and watched him out at the gate by the light of the moon, which had struggled out from behind the grey clouds.

Lucy ran back to the foot of the stairs and again called to Laura. But there came no response.

"I think she must have gone to sleep, as papa said, Jane. How strange!"

"I will see, my dear. You go back to the drawing-room, Lucy, and ring the bell for tea."

A disagreeable fear had come over Jane Chesney's heart that Laura was not upstairs; that she had stolen out again to the garden to meet Mr. Carlton. She looked into Laura's room and spoke. It was empty.

"Yes! with him again!" she murmured. "I will go after her, for it *shall* not be."

She went softly out at the front door, and walked down the wet gravel in her thin home shoes. But nothing came of it. It was evident that her sister was not there; and an idea arose to Jane that Laura must have gone out with Mr. Carlton.

Could it be possible that she *had* so far forgotten herself as to go out walking with him at night, in the face and eyes of South Wennock? In the bitterness of the conviction that it was so, Jane almost hoped that they might be met by her father, for she was beginning to find that she was not herself strong enough to cope with this.

She asked for a light, went into Laura's room, and looked for the black cloth mantle and bonnet that she ordinarily wore. They were not in their places: a proof that her suspicions were correct.

Jane stood for a moment, her elbow resting on a chest of drawers, her head pressed upon her hand. She could do nothing, except wait until Laura came in, and then remonstrate with her. "This is the result of my having discovered the meetings in the garden," thought Jane. "She feared to trust herself there again."

Jane returned to the drawing-room. The tea-things waited on the table, and Lucy looked up with an air of expectancy.

"Where's Laura, Jane? Is she coming?"

What was Jane to say to the child? It was very desirable that the fact of Laura's absence from the house should be concealed from her; indeed, Jane trusted it would not be known beyond herself. She put Lucy off with an evasive answer, and told her she might get

out the book of fairy tales again that she had been reading in the afternoon.

"But are you not going to make tea now, Jane?"

"Not just yet, dear. Papa's away, and there's no hurry. I have a little work that I will do first."

Of course she spoke hoping Laura would come in. She reached out her work and finished it; very prosy work it was; mending some wristbands of Captain Chesney's. The rain was pouring down again, and the time went on until the clock struck nine: Lucy's bedtime, and the child had not had her tea!

Where could Laura be?

Jane began to feel angry at the suspense, the perplexity altogether. She could not longer delay tea, and then the household and Lucy would inevitably know of Laura's absence. Just then Judith came in.

"Why, where's Miss Laura?" she exclaimed, in surprise. "I was in her room a minute ago, and found this on the floor, ma'am. I came in to bring it to her."

It was Laura's purse; the one she ordinarily used. Jane supposed Laura had dropped it from her pocket. It was quite empty. Jane had seen her recently making a new one with green silk and steel beads; perhaps she had taken that into use.

"Is Miss Laura out?" asked Judith.

There was no denying it; there could be no smoothing the fact down, no plausible excuse offered for it; and Jane Chesney's heart ached with its own pain.

"She—she may have stepped out to purchase something in the town that she was in a hurry for, some trifles for her worsted work," breathed Jane. "She is sure not to be long. I will make the tea, Judith."

The tea was made and partaken of, and still Laura did not appear. But when the time went on to *ten*, Jane grew terribly uneasy; not that a suspicion of the dreadful truth—all too dreadful as it would in every sense be to Jane—had yet penetrated to her brain.

She threw a shawl over her head, took an umbrella, and went to the garden gate. There she stood looking up and down the road, as well as the darkness would permit—for the night had become very dark now. Nothing could be seen; nothing heard save the rain as it pattered down.

Judith met her as she returned indoors, divining her uneasiness. "Can I go after her anywhere, Miss Chesney?" She was Lady Jane Chesney now—but let that pass. Jane herself never so much as thought of it.

"You should, if I knew where to send," replied Jane. "I can only think that she has taken shelter somewhere, perhaps in a shop,

waiting for the storm to abate. We do not know any one in South Wennock."

There was nothing for it but to wait; nothing, nothing. And Jane Chesney did wait until it was hard upon eleven. An idea kept intruding itself into Jane's mind—at first she rejected it as altogether improbable, but it gained ground, redoubling its force with every passing minute—that Laura had been so thoughtless and foolish as to take temporary shelter in Mr. Carlton's house.

Lucy began to cry; she grew frightened: "Was Laura lost?" she asked. Judith came in with a grave face, and Pompey stood outside the kitchen door and stared in discomfort, the hall lamp lighting up the alarm in his eyes. Such a thing had never happened in all his service, and he was longing to ask whether his favourite Miss Laura could be lost—as Lucy had asked.

"Miss Chesney," said Judith, apart to her mistress, "I had better go somewhere. Perhaps—perhaps she may have been overtaken by the heaviest of the storm on her way home, and may have stepped into Mr. Carlton's?"

Jane felt almost thankful for the words; they saved her the embarrassing pain of confessing to Judith that her own thoughts had tended in that direction.

"I cannot think she would do so, Judith; but she is very thoughtless; and—Mr. Carlton's house may have seemed a welcome shelter from the rain. Perhaps—if you don't mind going——"

Judith gave no time for the sentence to be finished. Another instant, and she reappeared in her bonnet and cloak, a large umbrella in her hand.

She went splashing down the Rise. To a quick walker, Mr. Carlton's residence was not more than five minutes' distance from Captain Chesney's, for it was all downhill; but in the present sloppy and muddy state of the road, Judith could not get on so fast, and the church clocks were striking a quarter past eleven when she turned in at the gate.

She turned in and felt somewhat embarrassed, for the house appeared dark and silent, as if its inmates had retired for the night. Even the coloured lamp was not burning. It certainly did not look as if the young lady were sheltering within the house; and Judith felt all the awkwardness of ringing them up, with the question—Was Miss Laura Chesney there?

She could only do that, however, or return home as she came; and she knocked at the house door. There was no answer; and presently she rang the night-bell.

Neither was there any answer to that, and Judith rang again and again. At the third ring, a window was heard to open at the top of the house, and Judith stepped from her shelter beneath the portico and looked up.

"What's the good of your keeping on ringing like that?" cried a woman's voice in remonstrance—it was, in fact, Hannah's. "You might have told by seeing the professional lamp unlighted that Mr. Carlton was away from the town."

"Is he away?" asked Judith.

"He went away suddenly this evening. Leastways, it was sudden to us, for he didn't tell us of it till he came down from his room with his hat on, and his portmanteau in his hand, and his carriage at the door to take him," continued the voice, in rather an aggravated tone, as if the sudden departure had not altogether given the speaker pleasure. "He said then he was going out, and should not be home for some days."

"Well," said Judith, "it's not Mr. Carlton I want. I came to ask whether one of our young ladies had stepped in here to shelter from the rain."

"Who is your young ladies?" came the next question.

"The Miss Chesneys. One of them went into the town this evening, and, as she's not come home again, she must have taken shelter somewhere. We thought perhaps it might be here."

"No young lady has taken shelter here. There's been nobody here at all but Mrs. Newberry's servant, saying her mistress was worse, so I had to send her on to Mr. Grey's. She was as impudent as could be when she found Mr. Carlton had gone away for some days, wanting to know why he could not have told them of it."

"My young lady is not here, then?"

"She's not here, and she has not been here. I'll make Evan paste a notice on the lamp to-morrow night, 'Mr. Carlton out of town,'" pursued the voice wrathfully. "There's no fun in being rung up for nothing, just as you get into your first sleep."

"Well, I'm sorry to have done it," said Judith, "but I couldn't help myself. Good night."

"Good night."

Judith halted at the gate, wondering what should be her next step. As she stood there, a sudden thought, like a ray of light—only not a pleasant ray—flashed upon her, and her mind was suddenly opened to a conviction of the truth. A conviction as sure and certain as though she had seen the night's drama enacted. Mr. Carlton's sudden journey and Laura's disappearance only too fully proved what that drama had been.

She went home with lingering steps: why hasten to impart the news she carried? Her mistress, whose anxious ear had caught the sound of the advancing footsteps, met her at the gate, and saw that she was alone.

"Oh, Judith! have you not found her?"

"No, ma'am. I—I——"

"What?" said Jane.

Judith entered upon her task in the best manner that she could, hinting at first very remotely at her fears. Not immediately did the appalling meaning, *the truth*, become clear to the unhappy listener —that Laura Chesney had abandoned her father's home.

CHAPTER XXI.

A DELIGHTFUL JAUNT.

SOUTH WENNOCK, as you may readily imagine, was up in arms the following morning. Such a dish of news had not been served up to it since the death of the ill-fated lady in Palace Street. There were *two* dishes now: the accession of Captain Chesney to the earldom of Oakburn, and the elopement of one of his daughters with Mr. Carlton.

Very cleverly had the getting-away been accomplished; and if some mishaps overtook the bride and bridegroom elect before the close of the night's journey, why, they did not materially retard the flight.

Mr. Carlton had laid his plans well. He was a clever plotter. The scheme arranged with Laura was that he should be in his open carriage at dusk, in a lane leading from the Rise, and that Laura should join him there. This lane, called Blister Lane, and other lanes and by-roads, little frequented, led to a small place named Lichford, where some of the trains stopped for passengers. It was seven miles from South Wennock, and Mr. Carlton knew that his open carriage would skim over the ground as quickly as any other conveyance; and it would have this advantage, that no one but himself would then be cognizant of the departure. He did not dare to appear with Laura at the more frequented station of Great Wennock; a hundred eyes would have recognized them.

Cleverly did he keep the secret. He went about his business that day as usual, seeing his patients; he visited them on foot, that his horse might be fresh for the night journey. He said not a word to any one of his invalids of his proposed absence; it might not have been expedient to do so; he said not a word at home. He dined as usual; afterwards he went up to his room; and when it grew so dark that candles had to be lighted, he rang the bell and ordered the carriage round. Not a minute did he keep it waiting at the door, but came down with a portmanteau in his hand. The woman-servant was in the hall as he crossed it, and looked at the portmanteau.

"I am going out for a few days," he said.

She was too much surprised to make any reply or ask any question;

it seemed so strange that he should be departing in that sudden manner. Mr. Carlton passed out to the gate, where his carriage waited. Evan was at the horse's head, dressed as usual to accompany his master. It was the same horse which had come to grief that Sunday night; Mr. Carlton had had him in use again about a week; Evan had been well much longer.

"I shall not want you with me to-night, Evan," said his master, when he had taken the reins to ascend.

Evan, as Hannah had done, wondered where his master was going to; but it was no concern of his, and he was rather pleased to hear that he was spared a drive on that rainy night. He placed the portmanteau under the seat, and Mr. Carlton settled himself comfortably in, under the head of the carriage.

"You need not wait up for me," said the surgeon.

"And the horse, sir?" returned Evan, opening his eyes.

"The horse will not be back to-night."

He drove away, leaving Evan standing there and looking after him. Mr. Carlton was not a communicative master at any time, but Evan did marvel that he had given no further explanation now. Was he to be up earlier than usual in the morning to receive the horse and Mr. Carlton? All that Evan supposed was, that he was going to some patient where he was likely to be detained for hours. But, then, what of the portmanteau?

"Where's the master gone to?" was Hannah's rather sharp question as he turned into the house.

"Who's to know?" retorted Evan. "He told me I was not to sit up for the horse. I suppose they'll neither of 'em be home to-night."

"To-night!" somewhat sarcastically repeated Hannah. "He's not coming home for some days; so he told me. It's always the way! I wanted to ask him for three parts of a day's holiday to-morrow, and now I can't take it."

Mr. Carlton drove quickly up the gentle ascent that led to the Rise, and was about to turn into the lane, agreed upon as the place of rendezvous, when advancing footsteps met his ear.

"Good evening," said Mr. Grey. "A nasty night."

"Very," emphatically pronounced Mr. Carlton. "Have you been far?"

"Only to Captain Chesney's."

"To Captain Chesney's! Why! who is ill there? Not the captain, for I saw him go by my house not half-an-hour ago."

"I have been to the little girl. She met with an accident this morning; fell against the window and cut her hands badly. You don't happen to have heard in the town whether the Earl of Oakburn is dead, do you?" continued Mr. Grey.

Mr. Carlton had heard nothing at all about the Earl of Oakburn:

but the name occurred to him as being the one mentioned by Captain Chesney the night of the coroner's inquest. "Why do you ask?" he said.

"Well, I have not heard of his death; but it strikes me that he is dead," replied Mr. Grey. "Two days ago I know that he was lying almost without hope, ill of typhus fever; and as letters have come to Captain Chesney's addressed to the Earl of Oakburn, I think there's no doubt that the worst has occurred. In fact, I feel sure of it. I thought perhaps you might have heard it mentioned in the town."

Mr. Carlton was a little at sea. He did not understand the allusion to the letters addressed to the Earl of Oakburn which had come to Captain Chesney's.

"Why, if he is dead, Captain Chesney is Earl of Oakburn, and the letters must be meant for him. I have just suggested that view of the matter to Miss Chesney."

Mr. Carlton was of too impassive a temperament to betray surprise. Other men might have dropped the reins in their astonishment, might have given vent to it in fifty ways. Mr. Carlton it only rendered silent. Captain Chesney, Earl of Oakburn? Why, then his daughters were the Ladies Chesney!

"You think it so?" he asked.

"I don't *think*," said Mr. Grey; "I feel certain of it. Good evening."

"Good evening," repeated the younger surgeon, and touching his horse with the whip, he turned into the lane and waited.

It was a somewhat singular thing, noted afterwards, that John Grey should have encountered both of them on that eventful night, in the very act of escaping. Laura Chesney, watching her time to steal away unobserved, took the opportunity of doing so when she knew Mr. Grey was in the drawing-room with Jane and Lucy. But she was not to get away without a fright or two.

She stole downstairs, along the kitchen passage, and out by the back door. There she saw Judith coming from the brewhouse with a lighted candle in her hand, and Miss Laura had to whisk round an angle of the house and wait. When the coast was, as she hoped, clear, she hastened down the side path, all the more hastily perhaps that she heard the drawing-room bell give a loud peal, and was turning into the broader walk near the gate, when she came into contact with Mr. Grey. The drawing-room bell had rung for him to be shown out, but he had forestalled it in his quickness. Laura Chesney's heart gave a great bound, and she felt frightened enough to faint.

"Good evening, Miss Laura Chesney. Are you going out on such a night as this?"

"Oh no. I—I—I was going to look at the weather," stammered Laura, feeling that the Fates were certainly opposed to her expedition.

"The weather is nearly as bad as it can be," observed Mr. Grey. "It may clear up in a few minutes, but only to come on again. We shall have a rough night. Don't come farther, my dear young lady; it's enough to drown you."

She turned back, apparently all obedience. But she only slipped in amidst the wet trees until Mr. Grey should be at a safe distance. Her heart was beating wildly: her conscience, even then, suggested to her to abandon the project. Of course, people who are bent upon these romantic expeditions cannot be supposed to remember common sense in the flitting; and Miss Laura Chesney had come out in thin kid shoes and without an umbrella. Neither was she wrapped up for travelling: she had not dared to put on anything but her ordinary attire, lest it should attract attention, were she met. Mr. Grey gone, she came forth from her hiding-place, and sped on in the mud and rain to the spot in Blister Lane—it was not five minutes' distance—where Mr. Carlton was awaiting her.

He had not waited long. Laura went up, panting with agitation and fright. The rain was then coming down in torrents. Mr. Carlton left his restive horse—for the horse did seem unusually restive that night—and sprang forward to meet and welcome her. She burst into a flood of tears as he hurried her into the carriage, under cover of its shelter.

"Oh, Lewis! I *could* not go through it again," she sobbed. "I was all but stopped by Mr. Grey."

They started. Mr. Carlton drove along at the utmost speed that the lane and circumstances allowed; and Laura gradually regained tolerable composure. But she felt sick with apprehension; her heart was fluttering, her ears were strained to catch any sound behind her, so apprehensive was she of enemies in pursuit. Mr. Carlton asked her what it was that had arisen in connection with letters and the Earl of Oakburn, and Laura mechanically answered. In a moment of less agitation, she would have inquired how he came to know anything about it; but the question never occurred to her in this.

"We have been expecting Lord Oakburn all day," she said. "He is related to us; his father and papa were first cousins."

"You have been expecting him?"

"Yes, but he had not arrived when I came away. Two letters have come addressed to him; and therefore we know he must be coming. When Jane was worrying about a room for him this morning, I could have told her, had I dared, that mine would be at liberty."

It was evident that Laura knew nothing of the earl's illness, or the view of affairs suggested by Mr. Grey. Mr. Carlton suffered her to remain in ignorance. Did the idea occur to him that the Lady Laura Chesney, daughter of the Earl of Oakburn, might not be so ready to take flight with a country surgeon struggling into practice, as Miss Laura Chesney, daughter of the poor and embarrassed half-pay post-captain, was proving herself to be? It cannot be told. South Wennock had its opinion upon the point afterwards, and gave vent to it freely.

They were within a mile and a half of Lichford, and Mr. Carlton was urging his horse madly along, like a second Phaeton, afraid of missing the train, when a check occurred. The horse fell down. Suddenly, with as little warning or cause as there had been on that memorable Sunday night, the animal came down suddenly, and the carriage turned over on its side, one of the wheels flying off.

Mr. Carlton and Laura were not thrown out. The hood over their heads, the apron over their knees, they were too well wedged in to be spilled. Mr. Carlton extricated himself, be hardly knew how, and released Laura.

The horse was plunging violently. Placing the terrified girl on the bank as much out of harm's way as was possible, Mr. Carlton had to give his best attention to the horse. There was nothing for it but to cut the traces. Fortunately he had a sharp knife in his pocket, and succeeded in severing them; and the horse started off into space, it was impossible to tell where.

Here was a pretty situation! Did Mr. Carlton remember the ridiculous words of the woman who had come to his aid on that Sunday night? Had he been of the same belief that she was, he might surely have taken this upset as a warning against persisting in the present journey. Mr. Carlton was not half so metaphysical or superstitious. He simply threw an ugly word after the offending horse, and blamed his own folly for trusting to the surefootedness of an animal that had once fallen.

Mr. Carlton looked around him in the dark night. The rain, which had ceased for half-an-hour or so, was coming down again violently. Laura shivered against the bank where he had placed her, too sick and terrified for tears. It was of the utmost importance that they should reach the station in time for the next train that passed, and be away, if they would escape the pursuit that might follow on detection at South Wennock. But Mr. Carlton did not see how they were to get to it.

He could not leave the disabled carriage in the narrow road; he could not—at least Laura could not—reach the station without procuring another. He did not know this locality at all personally; he had never traversed it; it was a by-road leading to Lichford, and

that was all he knew about it. Whether any assistance was to be obtained or not, he was in complete ignorance.

As he peered about, wondering if anything more human than trees and hedges was between the spot and Lichford, a faint glimmer of light on one side the lane gradually disclosed itself to view through the misty darkness of the night. At the same moment the voice of his companion was heard, its accents full of lamentation and affright.

"What is to become of us? What shall we do? Oh, Lewis! I wish we had never come!"

He felt for her situation more keenly than she could. He implored her to be tranquil, not to give way to fear or despondency; he promised to extricate her from the embarrassment with the best exertion of his best efforts, and moved forward in the direction of the light.

He found that it proceeded from a candle placed in a cottage window. Mr. Carlton shouted, but it elicited no response, so he went close up, through what seemed a complete slough of despond, if mud can constitute that agreeable situation, and opened the door.

The room was empty. A poor room, bare of fire, with a clock in one corner and the candle in the window. Mr. Carlton shouted again, and it brought forth an old man from some back premises, in a blue frock and a cotton nightcap.

A thoroughly stupid old man, who was deaf, and looked aghast at the sight of the gentleman. He began saying something about "th' old 'ooman, who had gone to some neighbouring village and ought to have been home two hour afore and hadn't come yet, so he had stuck a candle in the winder to light her across the opposite field." Mr. Carlton explained his accident, and asked whether he could by any means obtain a conveyance that would take him on.

"Not nearer nor Lichford," answered the old man, when he had mastered the question by dint of putting his hand to his ear and bending it forward until it nearly touched Mr. Carlton's lips.

"Not nearer than Lichford!" repeated Mr. Carlton. "Are there no houses, no farms about?"

"No, there's nothing o' the sort," the old man rejoined. "There's a sprinkling o' cottages, a dozen maybe in all, atween this and Lichford, but they be all poor folk, without as much as a cart among 'em."

"Halloa! what's to do here?" came forth on Mr. Carlton's ear in hearty tones from the outside. Glad enough to hear them, he hastened out. A couple of labouring men, young and strong, had come upon the overturned carriage in going along the lane to their homes after their day's work. They almost seemed like two angels to Mr. Carlton, in his helpless position.

By their exertions—and Mr Carlton also gave his aid—the car-

riage and wheel were dragged under a shed belonging to the old man's cottage. They confirmed the information that no horse or vehicle was to be had nearer than Lichford, and Mr. Carlton was asking one of the men to go there and procure one, when he was interrupted by Laura.

Oh, let her walk! let her walk! she said. She should not dare to trust herself again behind a strange horse that night; and besides, if they waited they should inevitably lose the train.

"You cannot walk, Laura. Think of the rain—the roads. You can shelter within this old man's cottage until the conveyance comes for you."

But Laura, when she chose, could be as persistent as any one, and she was determined to bear on at once to Lichford, braving all inconveniences and discomforts. Poor thing! the chance of pursuit, of discovery, appeared to her as a vista of terror and disgrace. She had embarked on this mad scheme, and there remained nothing but to go on with it now.

So they started: one of the men carrying Mr. Carlton's portmanteau, a small parcel brought by Laura, and a lantern; the other, well bribed, entering on a search with another lantern after Mr. Carlton's fugitive horse. But it was a comfortless journey, that mile and a half of lane; a wretched journey. Umbrellas appeared to be as scarce an article in the locality as carriages; the old man confessed to possessing one—"a old green un, wi' ne'er a whalebone i' th' half o' him,"—but his missing wife had got it with her. How they gained the station, Laura never knew, Mr. Carlton almost as little. He had taken off his overcoat and wrapped it about her; but the rain was drenching them, and both were wet through when they reached Lichford station.

When within a few yards of it, the whistle and the noise of an advancing train sounded in their ears. Laura screamed and flew onward.

"Lewis, we shall be too late!"

Instinct, more than the lights, guided her through a waiting-room to the platform. Mr. Carlton, in little less commotion than herself, looked about for the place where tickets were issued, and found it closed. The rattle he gave at the board was enough to frighten the ticket-clerk inside, had one been there. But that did not appear to be the case: the place maintained an obstinate silence, and the board continued down. Mr. Carlton, in a frenzy, knocked and called, for the train was dashing into the station. Not a soul was about that he could see; not a creature. The labourer with the portmanteau and parcel stood behind him staring helplessly, and Laura had gone through to the platform.

Yes, Laura Chesney had gone through, and stood on the plat-

form, hardly knowing what she did, her upraised hands by their gesture imploring the train to stop. But the train did not stop; it did not even slacken speed. The train went whirling recklessly on with the velocity of an express, and by the light of a lamp that hung in a first-class carriage, Laura saw, quietly seated in it, the form of Captain Chesney.

With a faint cry, with a shiver of dismay, she fell back against the wall. *We* know how different was the object of Captain Chesney's sudden journey, but Laura naturally concluded that he had gone in pursuit of her. He did not see her; there was some comfort in that; he had his face bent rather from her, as he conversed with a passenger on the opposite side of the compartment, and never looked towards her at all. Laura stood there in helpless fear, gazing after the train, expecting that it would stop and back in.

Mr. Carlton came forth from the room in an access of rage not easily described, at the neglect (as he supposed it) of the officials of the station. *He* looked after the train also, now whirling out of view, and could not understand why it had not stopped. A man with a band round his hat, who appeared to belong to the station, was advancing leisurely from some remote part of the platform, a huge lantern in his hand. Mr. Carlton attacked him vigorously.

What was the meaning of this? Passengers waiting to go by the train, and no one in attendance to issue tickets! He'd complain to the Company; he'd write to the *Times*; he'd—he'd—in Mr. Carlton's explosive anger it was impossible to say what he would not do.

The man received it all with stolid equanimity, simply saying in reply that the gentleman was mistaking the trains, if he had thought to get tickets for the one just gone by. It didn't stop there.

"Not stop here?" repeated Mr. Carlton, a little taken aback. "But there is a train stops here about this time?"

The man shook his head. "One stopped here twenty minutes ago," he said. "The one just gone on never stopped at Lichford yet, since I have been on the service."

And Mr. Carlton, hastily taking out his watch, which he might have consulted before, found that they had lost their intended train by more than twenty minutes, thanks to the accident.

"When does the next train pass that stops here?" he inquired.

"At midnight. Take tickets ten minutes afore it."

Mr. Carlton drew Laura's hand within his, and asked for the waiting-room. There was no waiting-room, he had the pleasure of hearing, except the small, cold, bare place where he had stood thumping for the ticket-clerk. The fire was nearly out; Mr. Carlton stirred it into a blaze and demanded more coal.

Placing her in a chair before it, he paid the man who had brought

the portmanteau and dismissed him. Then he asked the porter, who had gone into the place where the tickets were kept, whether refreshments could be obtained anywhere for the lady, and was answered by the same stolid stare. Such a question had never been put in that station before, and refreshments were not more procurable than tickets. It appeared that Mr. Carlton could only resign himself to the situation.

Laura was shivering inwardly and outwardly. Mr. Carlton took off some of her things, shook them, and hung them on a chair. Indeed it was not a pleasant plight to be placed in: arrested midway in this most provoking manner, in all this discomfort.

"I am so sorry!" he murmured. "If you don't mind waiting here alone, I'll go on to the village and bring you back something in the shape of refreshment. There's sure to be an inn in it. You are trembling with the cold and rain."

"It is not that—it is not that; and as for refreshment, I could not touch it. Did you see him?" she continued in a shivering whisper.

"See whom?" asked Mr. Carlton.

"Papa."

He looked at her in surprise. "See him? Where?"

"In that train just gone by. He was in one of the carriages."

Mr. Carlton truly thought she must be wandering; that the disasters of their unpropitious journey had momentarily obscured her intellects.

"Lewis, I tell you he was there—papa. He was in one of the carriages, sitting forward on the seat and talking to some one opposite. The light from the lamp fell full upon his face. It was papa, if I ever saw him."

That she was clear and rational, that she evidently believed what she asserted, Mr. Carlton saw. And though he could not give credence to so improbable a thing, nevertheless a feeling of uneasiness, lest Captain Chesney should be in pursuit, stole over him. He went to look for the stolid porter, who had disappeared, and found him at length in an outer shed, doing something to an array of tin lanterns. There he inquired about the fast train just gone by, and learnt to his satisfaction that it went whirling on, without stopping, on quite a different line of rail from that on which he and Laura were bound. He went back and told her this, observing that she must have been mistaken.

"Lewis, it is of no use your trying to persuade me out of my own eyesight. I wish I was as sure of forgiveness as I am that it was my father."

He busied himself in many little cares for her, quite neglecting his own drenched condition. Happening to look down, he per-

ceived that of the two muddy feet she was holding to the fire, one was shoeless.

"Where's your shoe, Laura?"

"It's gone."

"Gone!"

"It came off somewhere in the road as we walked along. Oh, it is all unfortunate together!"

"Came off in the road!" repeated Mr. Carlton. "But, my dear, why did you not speak? We could have found it; the man had the lantern."

"I was afraid to stop; afraid that we should miss the train. And I don't think I knew when I first lost it; the mud was up to my ankles."

Not a very comfortable state of affairs, in truth; and poor Laura shivered and sighed, shivered and sighed, as they waited on for the midnight train. Don't you ever attempt a similar escapade, my young lady reader, or the same perplexing griefs may fall to you.

CHAPTER XXII.

NEW HONOURS.

JANE CHESNEY'S position was a trying one. In the midst of the grief, it may be said the horror, she felt at the step taken by her sister Laura that eventful night, there was also the perplexity as to what her own course ought to be. *She* was powerless to prevent it now; in fact every one else was powerless. Mr. Carlton and Laura had gained some hours' start, and could not be brought back again. Had Jane known of the detention at the station at Lichford, still she could have done nothing. The fleetest horse, ready saddled and bridled at her door, would scarcely have conveyed her, galloping like a second Lady Godiva, along that dark and muddy cross-country road, in time to catch them before the arrival of the midnight train for which they waited, for it was some time past eleven ere Jane heard of it from Judith.

No; stop the flight she could not. That thought was abandoned as hopeless; and it must be remembered that Jane did not know they were gone to Lichford; she had no clue whatever to the line of route taken. Her chief perplexity lay in the doubt how best to convey the tidings to her father, so as to pain him least. To save him pain in any shape or form, whether mentally or bodily, Jane would have sacrificed her own life. Now and then faint hopes would come over her that their fears were groundless, that they were wholly mistaken, that they were judging Laura wrongfully; and a hundred

suppositions as to where Laura could be, arose to her heated fancy. Certainly the fact that Mr. Carlton had left the town for a few days, as reported to Judith by his servants, was not sufficient proof of Laura's having left it. But, even while these delusive arguments arose, the conviction of the worst lay all the deeper upon her mind.

Perhaps Jane Chesney was nearly the last in the town to hear the positive truth by word of mouth. With morning light there arrived at Mr. Carlton's house the man whom he had charged to look after the missing horse. It had been found with little trouble, standing still with its nose over a field gateway. Securing him for the night, the man started before dawn to convey him to the address at South Wennock, given him by Mr. Carlton; he had to be back to his own work betimes, at the farmer's where he was a day labourer. When rung up, just as Judith had rung them up the night before, the servants could scarcely believe their own eyes to see the horse arrive home in that fashion, led by a halter and covered with mud. The man explained, so far as he was cognizant of it, what had happened on the previous night; told his orders as to bringing home the horse, provided he could find him, spoke of where the carriage was lying, and said it had better be looked after.

Whether it was from this circumstance, or whether the report arose in that mysterious manner in which reports do arise, no one knows how or where, certain it was, that when South Wennock sat down to its breakfast-tables on that same morning, half its inhabitants were talking of the elopement of the surgeon with Miss Laura Chesney. Mr. John Grey was the one to convey its certain tidings to Jane.

He was at the house very early—soon after eight o'clock. Called to a distance that day, his only chance of seeing Lucy Chesney's hands was to pay them a visit before his departure; in fact, he had promised to do so on the previous night.

Jane was ready for him; Jane alone: glad of an excuse to keep the little girl in bed in that house of trouble and perplexity, Jane had told her not to rise to breakfast. Mr. Grey was pained at the look of care on Miss Chesney's face—let us call her so for a little while longer!—at the too evident marks of the sleepless and miserable night she had passed.

"Do not suffer this untoward event to affect your health!" he involuntarily exclaimed; and his low tone was full of tender concern, of considerate sympathy. "How ill you look!"

Jane was startled. Was it known already? But there was that in Mr. Grey's earnest face that caused her heart to go out to him there and then, as it might have done to a friend of long-tried years.

"Is it known?" she asked, her life-pulses seeming to stand still,

"It is," he answered, with a grave face. "The town is ringing with it."

Jane, standing before him with her quiet bearing, gave no mark of pain, except that she raised her hand and laid it for a few moments on her temples.

"I have been hoping—against hope, it is true, but still hoping—that it *might* not be; that my sister might have taken refuge somewhere from the storm, and would return home this morning. Oh, Mr. Grey, this has come upon me as a thunderbolt. If you knew how different from anything like this she has been brought up to!"

"Yes, I feel sure of that," he said. "It is, I fear, a most mistaken step that she has taken. Certainly an unwise one."

"How has it become known?" asked Jane, shading her eyes.

"I cannot tell," he replied. "For one thing, I heard that Mr. Carlton's horse had been sent back this morning."

"His horse?"

"He drove your sister to Lichford, I understand, to take the train there. I met him last night as I left here. He was close to Blister Lane—about to turn into it, and I wondered what patient he could have in that locality to call him out in his carriage at night. I little thought of the expedition on which he was bent; or that he was waiting to be joined by Miss Laura Chesney. I saw her also; she must have been on her way to him."

Jane lifted her eyes. "Mr. Grey! you saw her, and you did not stop her!"

John Grey slightly shook his head. "It was not possible for me to divine the errand on which she was bent. She was in the garden as I left here, and I said something to her about the inclemency of the night. I understood her to answer me—at least I inferred it—that she was only going to the gate to look at the weather. I know the thought that crossed me was, that she was anxious because her father was out in it. There's a report that some accident occurred to the horse and carriage when they were nearing Lichford," continued the surgeon, "and that Mr. Carlton and the lady with him had to go the rest of the way on foot. It is what people are saying; I don't know any of the particulars."

"Nothing can be done to recall her now?" said Jane, speaking the words in accordance with her own thoughts, more than as a question.

"Nothing. The start has been too great—a whole night. They are probably married by this time, or will be before the day is over."

"Mr. Grey—I seem to speak to you as to an old friend," Jane broke off to say; "a few minutes ago and I had not believed that I could have so spoken of this to any one. *How* shall I tell my father?"

"Ah," said Mr. Grey, "it will be sad news for him. My eldest little daughter is only eight years old, but I can fancy what must be the feelings of a father at hearing these tidings. I think—I think——"

"What?" asked Jane.

"Well, it is scarcely the thing to say to you just now, but I think I would rather lose a daughter by death than see her abandon her home in this way," continued Mr. Grey in his frankness. "My heart would be less wrung by it. Will you allow me to ask whether Mr. Carlton was paying his addresses to her?"

"He had wished to do so, but was peremptorily forbidden by my father. That was the cause of the rupture which led to his dismissal from the house. None of us liked Mr. Carlton, except—I must of course except—my sister Laura."

That she spoke in pain—that she was in a state of extreme distress, was all too evident; and Mr. Grey felt how useless would be any attempt at consolation. It was a case that did not admit of it. He asked to see Lucy, and Jane went with him to her room. The hands were going on as well as possible, and Mr. Grey said there was not the least necessity for keeping her in bed. Poor Jane felt almost like a deceitful woman, when she reflected how far apart from the cuts had been her motive for keeping Lucy there.

"Can I be of use to you in any way?" he asked of Jane at parting.

Jane frankly put her hand into his, and thanked him for his kindness. Ah, she found now, it was not Mr. Carlton's profession she had so disliked, but Mr. Carlton himself. John Grey was only a surgeon also, a general practitioner: and of him Jane could have made a friend and an equal.

"You are very good," she said. "Can you tell me the best way by which I can proceed to Pembury?"

"Are you going there?"

"I must go; I think I ought to go. Papa started for Chesney Oaks last night—and—you are aware perhaps that it is as you feared; Lord Oakburn is dead?"

"Yes, I know; his death has been confirmed."

"Papa left at once for Chesney Oaks; and his absence renders my position in this crisis all the more difficult. But I shall go after him, Mr. Grey; better that he should hear of this from my lips than from a stranger's. None could soothe it to him as I can."

Fond Jane! She truly deemed that none in the world could ever be to her father what she, his loving and dutiful daughter, was. How rudely the future would undeceive her, she dreamt not yet. Just to "soothe this terrible news to him," she had rapidly determined to make the best of her way to Pembury.

Pompey was already preparing to go thither by the earliest train,

and Jane started with him, leaving Lucy to the care of Judith. It was a long journey, and she meant to return the same day, but the trouble and fatigue to herself were nothing, if she could only spare ever so little trouble to her father. There was the jolting omnibus to Great Wennock, and there was the railway afterwards—thirty miles of it. It may be questioned whether Jane, in her distress of mind, so much as knew that the omnibus jolted at all.

Arrived at Pembury, Jane felt undecided what to do. She did not much like to go on to Chesney Oaks. It would seem almost as though they wished to seize upon their new possession by storm ere the poor young earl was cold on his bed. Neither did she know whether the imperious old dowager Countess of Oakburn might not be there; and Jane felt that to tell her this disgrace of Laura's would be a worse task than telling it to her father.

She inquired for an hotel, and was directed to the Oakburn Arms. Then she despatched Pompey to Chesney Oaks.

"You will tell papa, Pompey, that I have come here, and am waiting to see him," she said. "You must say that I have come all this way on purpose to impart to him something of the utmost moment; something that he must hear without delay—that I could not trust any one else to bring to him, for it is unpleasant news. And Pompey, *you* must not tell him: take care of that."

Pompey looked aghast at the bare suggestion. *He* tell such news to his choleric master! "I no dare, missee," was the characteristic answer.

Chesney Oaks, a fine old place, whose park stretched down to the very gates of Pembury, was less than a mile distant. Jane, ever thoughtful, despatched Pompey in a fly, that it might be at hand to bring back her father. She then sat down in the room to which she had been shown, and waited.

The room was on the ground-floor, and she watched eagerly the way leading from Chesney Oaks. There appeared to have been as much rain at Pembury as at South Wennock, to judge by the state of the roads, but it was a balmy spring day, this, and the sun shone out occasionally. It was lighting up Jane's face as she sat at the open window.

At length she saw the fly coming back again, and the sick feeling at her heart increased, now the moment was at hand when she must meet her father with the dreadful news. But the fly, instead of drawing up to the door of the inn, continued its way past it, and Jane saw that it was empty. It seemed like a welcome respite. She supposed her father had preferred to walk, and she stood looking out for him.

But she looked in vain. There appeared no sign of him, and Jane was beginning seriously to wonder what she should do in the

emergency, when a handsome chariot, bearing about it, although in mourning, all the badges of rank and state—the flowing hammercloth, the earl's coronet on its panels, the powdered servants, the sparkling silver ornaments on the fine horses—came bowling up to the door. Another moment, and the waiter appeared, showing in the powdered footman, who handed a small bit of twisted paper to Jane.

"For me?" she involuntarily exclaimed.

"Yes, my lady."

Jane quite started. My lady! Why, yes, she was my lady. But the salutation sounded strange to her ears, and a deep blush arose to her fair face. Opening the paper, she read the following characteristic lines written in pencil.

"I cannot imagine what you have come for, Jane; but you can come on to Chesney Oaks and explain. Pompey's a fool."

By which last sentence Jane gathered that poor Pompey must have managed to plunge into hot water with his master, in his efforts not to tell the secret. She also divined that the carriage had been sent for her use.

"You have brought the carriage for me?" she asked.

"Yes, my lady. My lord requested you would go on without delay."

But Jane hesitated. She thought of the fever. Not for herself did she fear it—at least it was not her own danger that struck her, but she was about to return home to Lucy, and might carry it to her.

"There may be danger in my entering Chesney Oaks," she said. "I am going home to a young sister, a little girl, and children take disorders so easily."

"I don't think there will be much danger, my lady," returned the man. "My lord is in the left wing of the house, and the—the body of the late earl is lying in the wing at the other extremity, where he died. No one else has taken the fever."

How strange it was, too, to hear her father called my lord; how strange to spring suddenly into all this pomp and state. Jane did not see that she could hesitate any longer, and passed out of the room.

Gathered in the passage were the landlord of the inn, his wife, the waiter, and a chambermaid, ready to make obeisance to her as she passed. Jane felt rather little as she received the honours; she had on an old black silk dress, a shabby warm grey shawl, and a straw bonnet trimmed with black, the worse for wear. But Jane need not have feared: she was a lady always, and looked one, dress as she would.

"Who is she?" asked the landlady in a low tone of the footman,

arresting him as he was marching past her; for she did not know as yet who the stranger was, except that she was one of the family from which their inn took its sign.

"The Lady Jane Chesney; the new earl's daughter."

And the footman stood with his imposing cane, and bowed Jane into the carriage, and the people of the Oakburn Arms bowed again from its entrance; and thus Jane was bowled off in state to Chesney Oaks, the fine old place now her father's.

Winding through a noble avenue of trees, the park stretching out on either hand, the house was gained. A red-brick mansion, with a wing extending out at either end. The wings were modern, and contained the handsomest rooms; the centre of the house was cramped and old-fashioned. In the wing to the right, as they approached, the poor young earl had lain ill and died; what remained of him was lying there now. Jane found that the carriage did not make for the principal entrance, but turned suddenly off as it approached it, continued its way to the other wing, and stopped there at a small door.

A gentleman in black—he looked really like one—was at the door to receive Jane, evidently expecting her. It was the groom of the chambers. He said nothing, only bowed, and threw open the door of a small sitting-room, where the new earl was standing.

"Lady Jane, my lord."

It would take Jane some little time to get accustomed to this. Lord Oakburn was in conversation with a grey-haired man who wore spectacles,—the steward, as Jane afterwards found, and books and papers were lying on the table, as though they were being examined.

"So it's you, Jane, is it?" said the earl, turning round. "And now what on earth has brought you here, and what's the matter? That idiot says that it's not Lucy's hands, and he'll say no more, but stares and sobs. I'll discharge him to-night."

Jane knew how idle was the threat; how often it was hurled at the unhappy Pompey. Before she could say a word, her father had begun again.

"The idea of your sending for me to Pembury! Just like you! As if, when you had come so far, you could not come on to Chesney Oaks. It's my house now—and yours. You never do things like any one else."

"I did not care to come on, papa," she answered in a low tone. "I thought—I thought Lady Oakburn might be here, and I did not wish to meet her just now. I have brought very bad news. I thought, too, of the fever."

"There's no danger from that; the poor fellow's lying in the other wing. And Lady Oakburn's not here; but what difference it would

make to you if she had been, I should be glad to know. And now, what have you got to tell me? Is the house burnt down?"

Jane looked at the steward, who was standing aside respectfully. He understood the look—that she wished to be with her father alone—and turned to his new master.

"Shall I come in again by-and-by, my lord?"

Lord Oakburn nodded acquiescence. He had slipped as easily and naturally into his new position as though he had been bred to it. As the son of the Honourable Frank Chesney, he had seen somewhat of all this in his youth. Jane had not. Although reared a gentlewoman, she had always been only the daughter of a poor naval officer.

The room they were in, plain though it was as compared with some, bore signs of luxury. The delicate paper on the walls, the gilded cornices, the rich carpet into which the feet sank, the brilliant and beautiful cloth covering the centre table. Lord Oakburn had been shown to it that morning for breakfast, and he intended to make it his sitting-room during this his temporary sojourn in the house. How things had changed with him! And, but for the terrible escapade of the previous night, what a load of care would have been removed from Jane's heart. No more pinching, no more miserable debts, no more dread of privation for her dear father.

She untied her bonnet-strings, wondering how she should break it to him, how begin. Lord Oakburn pushed the steward's papers into a heap as they lay on the costly cloth, and turned to her, waiting.

"Now, Jane, why don't you speak? What is it?"

"It is because I do not know how to speak, papa," she said at length. "I came myself to see you because I thought none could break the news to you so well as I: and now that I am here I seem as powerless to do it as a child could be. Papa, a great calamity has overtaken us."

The old sailor, whatever his roughness of manner, his petty tyranny at home, loved his children truly. He leaped to the conclusion, in spite of Pompey's denial, that something bad had arisen from Lucy's hands. He believed, now he saw Jane and her emotion, that no slight misfortune had brought her.

"The obstinate villain! Not to tell me! And you, Jane, why do you beat about the bush? Is the child dead?"

"No, no; it is not Lucy, papa; her hands are going on quite well. It—it is about Laura."

Lord Oakburn stared. "Has *she* fallen through a window?"

"It is worse than that," said Jane in low tones.

"Worse than that! Hang it, Jane, tell it out, and have done with it," he cried in a burst of passion, as he stamped his foot. Suspense to a man of his temper is not easy to bear.

"Laura has run away," she said.

"Run away!" he repeated, staring at Jane.

"She quitted the house last night. She must have been gone when you left it. Don't you remember, papa, you called to her and she did not answer? Not at first—not until it was too late to do anything—did I know she had run away."

No suspicion of the truth dawned on Lord Oakburn, and Jane seemed to shrink from speaking more plainly. Compared with what he had dreaded—the death of Lucy—this appeared a very light calamity indeed.

"I'll run her," said he. "Where has she run to? What has she run for?"

"Papa, she has not gone alone," said Jane, looking down. "Mr. Carlton is with her."

"What?" shouted the peer.

"They have gone off to be married, I fear. There can be no doubt about it."

A pause of consternation on the part of the earl, and then the storm broke out. Jane had never witnessed anything like it. He did not spare Laura, he did not spare Mr. Carlton; a good thing for both offenders that they were not within his reach in that moment of passion.

Jane burst into tears. "Oh, papa, forgive me," she said. "I ought to have told you less abruptly; I meant to tell you so; but somehow my powers failed me. I am so *grieved* to be obliged to bring you this pain."

Pain! yes, it was pain to the honest old sailor, pain of the keenest description. His beautiful daughter, of whom he had been so proud! His passion somewhat subsided, he sat down in a chair and buried his face in his hands. Presently he looked up, pale and resolute.

"Jane, this makes the second. Let her go as the other did. Never mention her name to me again, any more than you mention that other."

And Jane felt all the more sad when she heard the injunction "*that other;*" an injunction which she should not dare to break. She felt it all the more keenly because she had been confidently hoping that her father's new rank as a peer of England would cause the barrier of silence as to "*that other*" to be raised.

A dinner hastily served was brought in, and when she had partaken of it, with what appetite she had, she proceeded to the station at Pembury to return home, conducted to it in all the pomp and state that befitted her new position as the Lady Jane Chesney.

But on poor Jane's heart as she was whirled back to Great Wennock, there rested a sense of failure as to the expedition of the

day. If she had only contrived to break it better! she thought in her meek self-reproach. It never occurred to this loving daughter that Lord Oakburn was just the man to whom such things cannot be "broken."

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE RETURN.

THE weather seemed to have taken an ill-natured fit and to be favouring the world with nothing but storms of hail and rain. The flight of Mr. Carlton and Laura Chesney had taken place on a Wednesday evening, and on that day week, Mr. and Lady Laura Carlton returned to South Wennock in some such a storm as the one in which they had departed from it. They had been married in Scotland, and had since solaced themselves with a few days' tour, by way of recompense for the mishaps attending their flight, but the weather had been most unpropitious.

Mr. Carlton's servants had enjoyed a week of jubilee. Orders had been received from that gentleman, written the day after his marriage, to have everything in readiness for the reception of their mistress; but the house had been so recently put in order on the occasion of the arrival of the new furniture, that there was really nothing to do; a little impromptu work, chiefly in the kitchens, they had in a charwoman to perform, taking holiday themselves.

But on this, the Wednesday night, they had resumed duty again, and were alike on their best behaviour and in their best attire to receive their master and new mistress. A post-carriage was ordered to be at the Great Wennock station to await the seven o'clock train, and the servants looked out impatiently.

When a carriage is bringing home people from a wedding, it generally considers itself under an obligation to put forth its most dashing speed. So argued Mr. Carlton's servants; therefore, long before half-past seven, they were on the tiptoe of expectation, looking and listening for the arrival as the moments flew by.

The moments flew, however, to no purpose. No one arrived. Eight o'clock struck, and half-past eight struck, and the servants gazed at each other in wonderment as to what could be the cause of the delay.

Ben, the surgery boy, went out to the front gate, inserted the tips of his boots between the upright iron wires, and stood there taking a little riding recreation, which he accomplished by swinging the gate backwards and forwards. There was no troublesome household authority at hand, either Hannah or Evan, to box his ears and send

him off, so he enjoyed his ride as long as he pleased, whistling a popular tune, and keeping his eyes fixed in the direction of the town.

"I say," cried he, to a butcher-boy of his acquaintance, who passed on his way home from his day's work, "do you know what makes the train so late to-night?"

"What train?" asked the young butcher, stopping and gazing at Ben.

"The seven train to Great Wennock. It ought to have been in a good hour ago."

"It is in," said the boy.

"It isn't," responded Ben. "Who says it is?"

"I says it. I see the omnibus come in with my own eyes. Why, it's on its road back again to take the folks to the nine train."

Indisputable evidence to Ben's mind. He jumped off the gate and dashed indoors, without the ceremony of saying good night to his friend.

"I say, the train's in; it has been in ever so long," he cried to Hannah and the others.

"No!" exclaimed Hannah.

"It has, then. Bill Jupp has just told me. He see the omnibus coming back at its time with his own eyes."

"Then something has detained them," decided Hannah, "and they won't be here to-night."

Quite comforting assurance. A whole night's further holiday! "Let's have supper," said Sarah, the additional maid who had been this week engaged by Hannah according to her master's written directions.

"I say, though," cried Ben, "there's another train. Bill Jupp saw the omnibus going back again for it."

"That don't come from their way, stupid!" corrected Hannah. "The trouble I've had, laying out their tea and things in the dining-room, and all to no purpose!" she added crossly.

Of course, their master and mistress not being home to tea or supper, there was all the more reason why the servants should enjoy theirs. And they were doing so to their hearts' content, sitting over a well-spread table, at which much laughter prevailed, and rather more noise than is absolutely necessary for digestion, when a loud ring startled them from their security.

"My goodness!" exclaimed Hannah. "If it should be them, after all! What on earth—get along, Evan, and open the door! Don't sit staring there like a stuck pig."

Thus politely urged, Evan sprang out of the kitchen and into the hall. He opened the front door with a swing grand enough to admit a duke, and found himself confronted with nothing but a woman and a bundle.

A large awkward bundle, which appeared to have been put hastily together, and was encased by a thick old shawl to protect it from the rain. The bearer was Judith. She passed Evan without ceremony or preface, and dropped the bundle on a chair in the hall.

"Why, what's that?" exclaimed Evan in surprise, who did not recognize Judith. In fact, he did not know her.

"Can I speak a word to Lady Laura Carlton?" was the answer.

Evan looked at the woman. Hannah, who had come into the hall, looked also; the boy Ben pushed himself forward and took his share of looking.

"I come from Cedar Lodge, from Lady Jane Chesney," explained Judith, perceiving she was unknown. "These are some of Lady Laura's things; but her trunks will be sent to-morrow."

Hannah cast a contemptuous glance at the bundle. She thought it rather an unceremonious way of forwarding an instalment of a bride's wardrobe. In truth, Judith felt the same herself, but there was no help for it.

On the day of Laura's marriage, subsequent to the ceremony, she had written a half-penitent note to Jane for the escapade of which she had been guilty, and stated that the ceremony had taken place. In this was enclosed a wholly penitential letter to her father. The superscriptions, "Captain Chesney, R.N.," and "Miss Chesney," proved that Laura was in ignorance of their accession to higher rank. Jane had forwarded the note to her father at Chesney Oaks, and he had flung it into the fire unread. Her own letter she did not dare to answer, for she had been strictly forbidden to hold further communication of any sort with her offending sister. The late earl's funeral took place on the Monday; Lord Oakburn returned to Cedar Lodge on the Tuesday; and on the Wednesday morning there arrived another letter from Laura to Jane, stating that she and Mr. Carlton purposed to be at South Wennock on Wednesday evening, and begging Jane to send her things to her new home, to await her arrival at it, especially a certain "light silk dress."

"Not a thread of them," cried the earl, bringing down his stick decisively when Jane spoke to him. "She shall have no clothes sent from here."

"But, papa, she has nothing to wear," pleaded Jane. "She did not take with her as much as a pair of stockings to change."

"So much the better," fumed the earl. "Let her go barefooted."

But Jane, considerate even for the offending Laura, and for the straits she would be put to without clothes, ventured to appeal to her father again in the course of the day. Not until evening would the earl unbend. And then, quite late, he suddenly announced that the things might go, and that the sooner the house was rid of them, the better.

It was then eight o'clock. Jane hastily put some things together, the light silk dress particularly mentioned, and a few other articles that she deemed Laura might most need, and despatched Judith with them, charging her to see Lady Laura privately, and to explain how it was that the things had not been properly sent, and could not be sent, now, before the morrow. Hence it was that Judith stood in Mr. Carlton's hall demanding to see its new mistress.

"They have not come yet," was the reply of Hannah, given crustily.

"Not come!" repeated Judith. "My lady told me they were to return by the seven o'clock train."

"And so they sent us word, and there's the tea laid ready in the dining-room, but they haven't come. The train's in long ago, and it haven't brought them."

"Well," said Judith slowly, considering how much to say and how much to withhold, "will you tell your lady that we were not able to send her things to-day—except just these few that I have brought—but that the rest will all be here to-morrow. I am sorry not to see her ladyship, because I had a private message for her from her sister."

"I'll tell her," answered Hannah in an ungracious, grumbling tone; for the advent of a new mistress in the house did not meet her approbation. "I think master might have said a word to us before he went away, and not have—what's that?"

The sound of a carriage thundering up to the gate and stopping, scared their senses away. Evan opened the door at length, but not immediately; not until the bell had sent its echoes through the house.

They entered the hall; Mr. Carlton, and his young wife upon his arm. She wore two shoes now, and a beautiful cashmere shawl, the latter the present of Mr. Carlton. He was a fond husband in this his first dream of passion. Mr. Bill Jupp's information as to the train's arrival was incorrect. It was true that the omnibus had come back, but it brought no passengers with it; it had waited as long as it could, and then had to return to convey back its customers to the nine o'clock train. An accident, productive of no ill consequences save detention, had occurred to the seven o'clock train containing Mr. Carlton and his wife, and this caused the delay.

She came in with her beaming face, laughing at something said by Mr. Carlton, and nodding affably to the servants by way of her first greeting to them. Very much surprised indeed did she look at seeing Judith standing in the background.

"Judith!" she exclaimed, "is it you?"

Judith came forward in her quiet, respectful manner. "Can I speak a word to you, my lady, if you please? Lady Jane charged me with it."

Laura dropped Mr. Carlton's arm and stared at her. The salutation was strange to her ears. "My lady!" "Lady Jane!" Had the world turned upside down, Laura Carlton had not been more surprised, more perplexed.

It must be remembered that she had known nothing of the late earl's illness; when she quitted her home to fly with Mr. Carlton, he, Lord Oakburn, was being expected at Cedar Lodge. Mr. Carlton had said nothing to her of his surmised death; and during this wedding tour in the remoter parts of Scotland, not a newspaper had fallen under her notice. Laura was therefore still in ignorance of all that had taken place.

"What did you say, Judith?" she asked, after a pause. "Lady —Lady Jane sent you to me? Do you mean my sister?"

"Yes, my lady. She wished me to say a word to yourself."

No woman living had greater tact than Laura Carlton. Not before her new servants would she betray her perplexity at the strange title, or give the slightest indication that she did not know how it could belong to her. From the open door of the dining-room on the side of the hall streamed the light of fire and lamp, and she stepped into it, followed by Judith. Mr. Carlton had turned back, after bringing her in, to see what had been left in the post-chaise.

"Judith! you called my sister Lady Jane. Has anything happened to Lord Oakburn?"

It would have been Judith's turn to stare now, but that she was too well-bred a servant to do anything of the sort. A whole week since the change! it seemed next to impossible that Lady Laura should still be in ignorance of it. She answered quietly.

"Lord Oakburn is dead, my lady—that is, the late Lord Oakburn —and my master is Lord Oakburn now."

"I never heard of such a thing!" exclaimed Laura, sinking into a chair in her astonishment. "When did he die? How long have you known it?"

"He died on the Tuesday, yesterday week, my lady. He died of fever at Chesney Oaks, and the letter that came on the Wednesday morning to our house was not for him, after all, but for my master."

"And when did you find out that it was for papa?—when was it first known at home?"

"My lady, it was known just about the time that you left it. Mr. Grey was there that evening, if you remember, and he told the news of Lord Oakburn's illness; that he was lying without hope a day or two before at Chesney Oaks. There could be no doubt then, he said, that the letters had come for my master as Earl of Oakburn."

"I wonder whether Lewis knew it?" was the question that

crossed Laura's heart. "Mr. Grey spoke to him that night as he left our house. But no, he could not know it," came the next thought, in her unbounded love and confidence, "or he would have told me."

Question after question she poured upon Judith, and the woman told all she knew. Lord Oakburn was at home again now, she said, but she believed he and the young ladies were very soon to depart for Chesney Oaks.

"Judith," resumed Laura at length, her other questions being exhausted, and she lowered her voice to timidity as she spoke, "was papa very—very furious with me that night?"

"My lady, you forget that I have said he had gone before it was known that you were missing. It was to tell him of it that Lady Jane went the next day all the way to Chesney Oaks."

"True," murmured Laura. "Does he seem in a terrible way about it, now that he is back again?"

"Yes, I fear he is," Judith was obliged to answer.

"And what did you come here for to-night, Judith? You said you had a message from my sister."

Judith explained about the clothes: why it was that so few had been brought, and those at the last moment. The message from Jane, though put into the least offensive words possible, was to the effect that Laura must not venture at present to attempt to hold intercourse in any shape whatever with her family.

Laura threw back her head with a disdainful gesture. "Does that interdict emanate from my sister herself?" she asked.

"I think not, Miss Lau—my lady. She cannot go against the wishes of the earl."

"I know that she will not," was Laura's scornful comment. "Well, Judith, tell Lady Jane from me that it's no more than I expected, and that I hope they'll come to their senses some time."

"And the little girl whispered to me as I was coming away to give her love, if you please," concluded Judith.

"Darling child!" echoed Laura. "She's worth ten of that cold Jane."

Mr. Carlton entered as Judith departed. Laura stood talking with him on the new aspect of affairs, but she was no wiser at the conclusion of the conversation than she had been at the beginning, as to his having known of Lord Oakburn's death before their flight. He drew her attention to the tea-table, which looked inviting enough with its savoury adjuncts, that Hannah had prepared and laid out.

"Yes, presently," she said, "but I will take off my things first. You must please to show me my way about the house, Lewis," she added, laughing, as she turned at the door and waited. "I don't know it yet."

Mr. Carlton laughed in answer and went with her into the hall. It was a handsomer and more spacious residence than the one she had relinquished, Cedar Lodge, but it was very humble, when placed in comparison with Chesney Oaks. On the opposite side of the hall was a sitting-room, where Mr. Carlton generally received any patients who came to him, and behind that room and at the back were the kitchens. On the opposite side to the kitchens and behind the dining-room a few steps led down to the surgery, which was close to the side entrance of the house, and to a back staircase.

The principal staircase wound round from the back of the hall. Laura ascended it with Mr. Carlton. There was plenty of space here. A handsome drawing-room and three bedrooms. In the front chamber, Laura's from henceforth, stood Sarah, unpacking the bundle brought by Judith, and ready to attend on her new mistress.

"Any alteration can be made in these rooms that you wish, Laura," observed Mr. Carlton. "If you would like one of them converted into a boudoir for yourself——"

Mr. Carlton's words were disturbed by a ring at the front door; a ring so loud and violent as to shake the house. He had broken off in vexation.

"I protest it is too bad!" he exclaimed angrily. "Not a minute in the house yet, and I must be hunted up and fetched out of it. I won't attend. Go down," he added to the new maid. "Say I am not at liberty to attend to patients to-night."

She obeyed, but came up again instantly.

"It is not patients, sir. It's a policeman. I told him you could see no one to-night, but he says he must see you."

Mr. Carlton seemed taken aback at the words. "A policeman!" he repeated in a strangely timid, hesitating tone.

"He was here yesterday and again this morning, asking after you, sir," returned the girl. "Hannah was very curious to know what he could want, but he wouldn't say, except that it was something connected with that lady who died in Palace Street."

Lady Laura, who had been taking off her bonnet at the toilette glass, turned round and looked at her husband.

"What can it be, Lewis?"

Never had Mr. Carlton appeared so vacillating. He took up the candle to descend, went as far as the door, came back and laid it on the drawers again. Again he moved forward without the candle, and again came back.

"Where is the policeman?" he questioned.

"He's standing in the hall, sir."

"It is a strange thing people cannot come at proper hours," he exclaimed, finally taking up the wax-light to descend. "I have a

great mind to say I would not see him, and make him come again in the morning."

Mr. Carlton recognized the policeman as one who had been busy in the case in Palace Street. He saluted Mr. Carlton respectfully, and the latter took him into the parlour opposite the dining-room.

"I'm sorry to disturb you at this late hour, sir," he said, "but there is such a row at our station about this business as never was."

"What about? What row?" asked the surgeon.

"Well, sir, we have a new inspector come on, through the other one being moved elsewhere, and he makes out, or tries to make out, that the affair has been mismanaged, else he says more would have come to light about it. His name's Medler, and, goodness knows! it seems as if he was going to be a meddler. First of all, sir, he wants to ask you a few particulars, especially as to the man you saw on the stairs."

"Does he want to ask me to-night?" sarcastically inquired Mr. Carlton.

"No, sir, but as soon as ever it is convenient to you in the morning; so I thought I'd just step down and tell you to-night, hearing you had come home."

"So he wants to rake it all up again, does he, this new inspector?" remarked Mr. Carlton.

"It seems so," replied the policeman.

"Well, he's welcome to all I can tell him of the matter. I'll call in to-morrow."

"Thank you, sir. It would be satisfactory, of course, if anything more should be found out; but if it's not, Mr. Medler will just see what reason he has to reproach us with negligence. Good night, sir."

"Good night," replied Mr. Carlton. And he shut the door on his troublesome and unseasonable visitor.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE WEDDING AT ST. MARK'S.

In the very heart of South Wennock, standing a little back from the street, nearly opposite the Red Lion Inn, was the old church of St. Mark; and on the morning after the return home of Mr. Carlton and his bride, this church was invaded by more people than could conveniently get into it, for a rumour had gone forth to the town that Mr. Carlton and Lady Laura were to be re-married.

It was even so. Possibly in deference to Laura's scruples; possibly that he himself was not willing to trust to the impromptu ceremony in Scotland, which had been of the slightest, and that he

would constitute her his own beyond the power of any future quibbles of the law, Mr. Carlton had returned home provided with a licence in all due form. The clergyman was apprised, and nine o'clock saw Mr. Carlton and Laura at the church.

If, by fixing that early hour, their motive was to avoid spectators, the precaution had utterly failed. How the news got about was a puzzle to Mr. Carlton as long as he lived. He accused the incumbent of St. Mark's, the Reverend Mr. Jones, of spreading it; he accused the curate, Mr. Lycett, to whom was deputed the duty of marrying them; he accused the clerk, who was charged to have the church open. But these functionaries, one and all, protested that they had not spoken of it. However it might have been, when Mr. Carlton and Laura arrived at the door in a close carriage, precisely one minute before nine, they were horror-struck at finding themselves in the midst of a dense crowd, extending from the street up to the very altar-rails, and through which they had to make their way.

"Rather a strong expression that," sneers some genial critic. "Horror-struck!" But it really did appear to apply to Mr. Carlton. Laura wore the handsome cashmere shawl which he had given her, the light silk dress sent by Jane, and a white bonnet and veil bought somewhere on her travels. She stood at the altar with downcast eyes and blushing cheeks, just as a young bride under the circumstances might be supposed to stand, never once looking at the throng, and apparently not heeding them. Not so Mr. Carlton. He stood with a ghastly face, into which the colour would not come by any effort of will, constantly glancing over his shoulder, not at the offending crowd, whom Mr. Carlton regarded simply with anger, and would have liked to duck wholesale in the nearest pond, but as if impelled by some imaginary fear. Did he dread the intrusion of his wife's father, Lord Oakburn? that he would, even at that useless and tardy hour, appear and forbid the ceremony? South Wennock, who prided itself upon its discernment, said so.

The accessories of a groomsman and a bridesmaid had not been provided by Mr. Carlton. The clerk performed the office of the one, and Laura dispensed with the other. The wedding ring was firmly placed upon her finger, and they turned from the altar as securely married as though there had been no previous runaway escapade. The licence had described her as Laura Chesney, otherwise Carlton, and it was so that she signed the book.

But there occurred an unlucky contretemps. The carriage waited at the church door, and Laura and Mr. Carlton had taken their seats in it on the conclusion of the ceremony, when, just as it was moving off amidst the dense mob of spectators, an open fly came from the opposite direction. It contained Lord Oakburn and his

stick. The earl, on his way back to Chesney Oaks, was now being conveyed to Great Wennock to catch one of the morning trains, Pompey on the box beside the driver, and a great portmanteau between Pompey's knees.

Perhaps nearly the only household in South Wennock to which the report of the morning's intended ceremony had not penetrated was that of Cedar Lodge. Even such newsmongers as milk-women and baker's boys were chary of telling aught there that concerned its runaway daughter. When, therefore, Lord Oakburn saw the crowd round the church, he looked at it in surprise, wondering what was taking place, and then he caught sight of the inmates of the close carriage about to be driven away from its doors. His daughter's terrified gaze met his.

Lord Oakburn's brow flushed red with passion. In his hot temper, he raised his stick with a menacing gesture, as if he would have struck one of them, bride or bridegroom, perhaps both, had he been near enough; or as if he meant to throw it at the carriage, as he sometimes threw it at Pompey. It did not go, however. He let it drop on the seat again, with a word that was certainly not a blessing; and the fly went on, and the meeting was over.

There was no fear on Mr. Carlton's countenance. Triumph now. The unnaturally pale hue which had overspread it during the ceremony had given place to its usual aspect, and he felt more inclined to laugh in Lord Oakburn's face than to fear him. Even the earl could not part them now.

Mr. Carlton entered his home with his wife. He snatched a hasty breakfast, and then started on his visits to his patients, who were in a state of rebellion, deeming themselves greatly aggrieved by the past week's absence. In the course of the morning his way took him past the police-station. Standing at its door was a middle-aged man, with an intelligent face and small snub nose, who looked at Mr. Carlton as he passed with that quiet regard that keen men, curious as to their neighbours' movements, sometimes display. It was Medler, the new inspector. The surgeon had gone some yards beyond the building, when he, perhaps, recollecting the previous night's interview, wheeled round and spoke.

"Can I see the inspector?"

"You see him now," was the answer. "I am he."

"I am told you want me," returned the surgeon. "Mr. Carlton," he added in explanation, finding he was not known.

"Oh, ah, yes, sir; I beg your pardon," said the inspector, intelligence replacing the questioning expression of his face. "Be so kind as to step inside."

He shut himself into a little bit of a room with Mr. Carlton. The surgeon had been in it once before. It was when he had gone to

give what information he could to the previous inspector, relative to the business for which he was now brought there again.

"I don't know any more than I did before," he observed, after alluding to the policeman's visit to him the previous night. "I gave the police at the time of the death all the information I possessed upon the matter—which was not much."

"Yes, sir, it's not that. I did not suppose you had come into possession of more facts. What I want with you is this—to relate to me quietly all that you know about it, as you did to my predecessor. I fear the affair has been mismanaged."

"Do you think so?"

"I am sure it has," continued Mr. Medler, improving upon his former assertion. "If the thing had been followed up properly, it might have been brought to light at the time. That's my opinion."

"It is not mine," dissented Mr. Carlton. "I do not see that anything more could be done than was done."

"Why, they never unearthed that Mrs. Smith, the woman who came down and took away the child! Never found out anything about her at all!"

"True," said Mr. Carlton. "They went to a hundred Mrs. Smiths, or so, in London, without finding the right one. And the conclusion they arrived at was, that Smith was not her name at all, but one she had assumed for the purpose of her visit here."

"It was the name by which the sick lady wrote to her on the night of her arrival, at all events," remarked the officer, with a nod that seemed to say he had made himself master of the whole business.

"But that may have been only part of a concerted plan. One thing appears to be indisputable—that the lady came down with the determination of remaining unknown. For my part, I am inclined to think that she did not come from London at all; that the woman Smith—if Smith was her name—did not come from London either. I believe that all that was said and done here was done with one motive—to blind us."

Mr. Carlton was leaning with his elbow on the narrow table, or counter, that ran along the wall, as he said this, slightly stooping, and making marks with the point of his umbrella on the floor. The inspector, watchful by nature and by habit, became struck with a sudden change in his face. A shiver seemed to pass over it.

"It is the most miserable business I ever had to do with," he said, lifting his eyes to the officer's. "I heartily hope I shall never become personally cognizant of such another. People persisted in mixing me up with it, just because Mrs. Crane was thought to have said that some friends recommended her to me as her medical attendant."

"And you cannot find that any one did so recommend you?"

"I cannot. I wrote to all the friends and acquaintances I possess in town, inquiring if they had recommended any lady to me; but could find out nothing. None of them so much as knew a Mrs. Crane."

"I think it is by no means sure that her name was Crane," remarked Mr. Medler.

"Just so. Any more than that the other one's name was Smith. There's nothing sure about any part of the business, except the death. That, poor thing, is sure enough."

"What is your own opinion, Mr. Carlton?" inquired the inspector, his tone becoming confidential. "Your private opinion, you know."

"As to what?"

"The cause of death. Of course we all know it was caused by the sleeping draught," he rapidly continued. "But I mean as to the fatal drug introduced into that draught—who put it in?"

"My opinion is—but it is not a pleasant task to have to avow it, even to you—that it was so mixed, inadvertently, by Stephen Grey. It is impossible for me to come to any other conclusion. I cannot imagine how two opinions upon the point can have arisen."

The inspector shook his head, as if he could not agree with Mr. Carlton; but he made no dissent in words. He did not believe the fault to lie with Stephen Grey.

"What I wished more particularly to ask you, sir, was about the man you saw on the stairs," he presently resumed. "*There's* the point that ought to have been followed up."

"I saw no man on the stairs," said Mr. Carlton. "I did fancy I saw a face there, it's true; but I have come to the conclusion that it was only fancy, and that my sight was deceived by the moonbeams."

"Will you swear there was no man there?"

"Well, no; I should not like to do that. Nevertheless, my firm belief is that there was no man there, no face at all; I think my sight misled me."

The inspector lifted his finger and shook it, by way of adding impressiveness to his words. "Rely upon it, sir, there *was* a man there, and that man is the one who did the mischief. I know—I know what you would say—that the draught smelt of the stuff when it arrived, as you testified; but I don't care for that. It seems a difficult point enough to get over at first, but I have picked the case to pieces in all its bearings, and *I* have got over it. I don't attach an atom of importance to it."

"Do you think I should testify to what was not true?" asked Mr. Carlton.

"Not a bit of it," returned the inspector, with calm equanimity.

"You'd be as anxious, naturally, to state the facts correctly, and throw as much light upon them, as we should. But I know how deceiving noses are. You fancied you smelt the poison in the draught, but you didn't really smell it, for it wasn't there. The nurse—what's her name? a fat woman—declares she could not smell anything of the sort; for I have had her before me here. She had been drinking a modicum of strong waters, I know; but they don't take all smell away in that fashion. Depend upon it her nose was truer than yours."

"Nonsense," said Mr. Carlton. "I am a medical man, remember, accustomed to the smell of drugs, and not likely to be deceived."

"That's just it," said the inspector obstinately. "Those accustomed to the smell of drugs, living amongst them, as may be said, in their surgeries, are more liable to fancy they smell them when they don't, than other folks are. There was no smell of poison in the draught when it was taken to the house," he doggedly continued.

"But I tell you there was," persisted Mr. Carlton.

"And I tell you, sir, there wasn't. There. I feel as sure of it as that we are now talking together. That man you saw on the stairs was the one to drop the poison into the draught after you had gone."

Mr. Carlton said no more. The inspector was evidently confirmed in his opinion, and it was of no use to try to shake it. There may have come over Mr. Carlton's memory also a recollection of the *second* view he had obtained of the face, on the night before his flight with Laura Chesney. That, surely, could not have been fancy; for Laura testified to seeing it—and hearing it—as well as he. How then reconcile that with his persistent denial that no one had been on the stairs? Mr. Carlton could not tell; but he was quite sincere in hoping, nay, in half believing, that that ill-looking face had existed wholly in his imagination.

"Is that all you have to ask me?" he inquired of the inspector. "My time is not my own this morning."

"No, sir, not all. I want you to be so kind as just to relate the facts as they occurred under your notice. I have heard them from Mr. Stephen Grey, and from others; but I must hear them from you. It's surprising how a word from one witness and a word from another helps us on to a correct view of a case. You saw her for the first time, I believe, on the Sunday night. It's a pity but you had kept the note she wrote you!"

"Who was to think the note would ever be wanted?" rejoined Mr. Carlton. "But if I had kept it, it would have told nothing."

"Every word, every scrap of paper is evidence to those who have learnt to use it," was the answer. "Go on, sir."

Mr. Carlton complied. He related the facts, so far as they had come under his cognizance; not with the minuteness he had found

himself obliged to use before the coroner, but with a clearness of detail that was quite satisfactory. The inspector listened attentively, and once or twice took something down in writing.

"That's all you know?" came the question when he had finished.

"That is all I know."

The inspector gently rubbed his nose with the feather of his pen. He was in deep thought.

"The case would resolve itself into a very small compass but for two opposing points in it," he presently said. "The one, the exceeding improbability that it was Mr. Stephen Grey who made any mistake in the mixing-up; the other, that man's face you saw on the stairs. I can't get over those."

"But I have assured you there was no man's face on the stairs," reiterated Mr. Carlton.

"I don't doubt that you believe so now. But you didn't believe so at the time, or you'd not have spoken about it to the widow Gould. Present impressions are worth everything, believe me, Mr. Carlton; and it is to that suspicious point I shall direct all my energies. I'd stake my place that somebody was there."

"As you please," said Mr. Carlton. "I suppose that is all you want with me."

"That's all, sir, and thank you. If we ferret out anything, you shall be one of the first to know it. Good morning."

Mr. Carlton, who was indeed pressed for time, and had inwardly rebelled at having to give so much of it to the police-station on that busy morning, hastened away the moment he was released. Crossing the street at railroad speed in a slanting direction past the church —for the police-station and St. Mark's Church were pretty close to each other—he sped round the corner near the Red Lion, in the direction that led to Great Wennock, and dexterously escaped being run over by a carriage that was turning into the principal street.

Mr. Carlton, who was an observant man, looked at the inmate of the carriage—a stout lady, dressed in deep mourning. She bent her resolute face forward—for it was a resolute face, with its steady dark eyes, and its pointed chin—to look at him. She had seen the narrowly escaped accident, and her haughty eyebrows plainly asked why one, looking so much of a gentleman, should have subjected himself to it through such ungentlemanly speed. How little did she suspect he was one whose name to her was a bitter pill—the surgeon, Lewis Carlton!

Mr. Carlton sped on, thinking no more of the carriage and its occupant. He was on his way to a sick patient who lived in one of the few houses situated at this, the near end of the Great Wennock road,—houses which had the gratification of witnessing day by day the frequent passing and repassing of the noted railway omnibus.

The carriage meanwhile slackened its speed as soon as it was round the corner, and the post-boy, after looking up and down the street in indecision, turned on his horse and spoke to the servant on the box, a staid, respectable-looking man, wearing as deep mourning as his mistress.

"Which way must I turn?"

The servant did not know. He looked up and down the street—very uselessly, for that could tell him nothing—and caught sight of the swinging-board of the Red Lion.

"There's an inn. You had better inquire there."

The post-boy drew his horses up to the inn door. Mrs. Fitch, who happened to be standing at it, moved forward; but the old lady had let down the front window, and was speaking sharply to the servant.

"What's the matter, Thoms? What are you stopping here for?"

Thoms turned his head back and touched his hat. "The post-boy does not know the way, my lady. I thought we had better inquire at this inn."

But the old lady was evidently one of an active, restless temperament, who liked to do things herself better than to have them done for her. Before Thoms—deliberate and stately as his mistress was quick—could speak to Mrs. Fitch, she had put up the front window, sent down the other, had her own head out, and was addressing the landlady.

"Where is Cedar Lodge?"

Mrs. Fitch dropped her habitual curtsey. "It lies a little out of the town, on the Rise——"

"Be so good as to direct the post-boy to it," interrupted the lady, with the air of one accustomed to command and be obeyed.

"You must turn your horses, post-boy," said Mrs. Fitch, moving nearer to him on the pavement. "Keep straight on through the town, and you will come to a long and gentle hill, where there's a good deal of new building. That's the Rise, and Cedar Lodge is about half-way up on the righthand side."

"Thank you, ma'am," said Thoms civilly; and the post-boy turned his horses as directed, and bore on through the town.

He had passed quite through it, when he saw the long ascent before him. That Rise was three-quarters of a mile in length; but all of it could not be seen from its base. On the left, standing alone, after the street was passed and before the gentle hill had begun, was a nice-looking white house. The lady within the carriage bent forward and glanced at it. She had not heard Mrs. Fitch's directions, and she thought it might be the one of which she was in quest, Cedar Lodge.

At that moment a lady threw up one of the windows on the first floor, and looked out. It was Laura Carlton: and her eyes met

those other eyes gazing from the carriage. Laura gave a suppressed scream of recognition; and the old lady, startled also, lifted her angry hand with a menacing gesture; just as the Earl of Oakburn had lifted his, in the earlier encounter in the morning at St. Mark's Church.

CHAPTER XXV.

A VISIT TO CEDAR LODGE.

THE Earl of Oakburn's sojourn at Cedar Lodge had been a short one. He had only gone home for a day or two to discuss future plans with Jane; or, rather, to inform Jane of his future plans, for he was one who discussed them only with his own will.

It would be necessary for him to let Chesney Oaks. He had succeeded to the peerage, it is true; but he had not succeeded to the broad lands, the proud rent-roll of an ordinary peer. A certain income he came into with the title as a matter of course; an income that, in comparison with the straitened means of later days, appeared a mine of wealth, and would no doubt prove so to him and Jane, with their simple and inexpensive habits. The late earl had had a large private fortune, which did not go with the title; and even with that, he had been reckoned a poor man for his rank. Yes, there would be nothing for it but to let Chesney Oaks, he observed to Jane. To keep up such a place as it ought to be kept up would absorb the whole of his income, for it could not be done under three or four thousand a year. He should therefore let Chesney Oaks, and reside in London.

Jane's heart acquiesced in everything. But for the blow just dealt out to them by Laura, she would have felt supremely happy. There had existed a dark spot in their domestic history for some little time past, but she had every hope that this change in their fortunes would remove it, and bring things straight again. It could not—she argued with herself—it could not be otherwise.

One word from Lord Oakburn would remove the cloud; would bring the wanderer home from an exile, voluntary at first, enforced now. And yet, Jane hesitated to beg that that word should be spoken. The subject had been a very bitter one. It had thrown a shadow of constraint between Jane and her father, where until then all had been so open; and he had long ago interdicted all mention of the subject on Jane's part. But this change in their fortunes rendered it necessary, as her good sense told her, that the interdict should no longer exist—that the matter should be opened up again.

Not in that hour's visit to Chesney Oaks would Jane allude to it. When she went to impart to him the ill-doings of one daughter, it was scarcely the time to beg grace for another. But when Lord Oakburn came home on the Tuesday, the day following the funeral of the late peer, then Jane resolved to speak to him. How she shrank from it, none but herself could tell. His bitterness against Laura was so demonstrative, that Jane was willing to let a day or two pass ere she entered upon the other bitter subject. "I will leave it until to-morrow," she thought; but when the morrow came (Wednesday), it brought Laura's letter about her apparel, and the earl went into so great an access of wrath, that Jane did not dare to speak. Still she could not let him go away again without doing so; and on the Thursday morning she took courage, as they were alone after breakfast, and the earl was giving her hurried orders about this and that—for the fly was already at the door to carry him away—she took courage and spoke quietly and pleadingly, though her heart was beating.

"Papa, forgive my speaking upon a forbidden subject. You will let me see after Clarice now?"

"What?" thundered the earl.

The tone was so stern, the countenance bent on Jane so dark in its anger, that all Jane's forced courage left her. Her manner grew hesitating; timid; imparting a notion of which she was painfully conscious—that she was asking something it was not right to ask.

"Clarice," she faltered. "May we not send to her?"

"No," emphatically spoke the earl. "Hold your tongue, Jane. Send to her! Let Clarice come to her senses."

And that was all it brought forth. Lord Oakburn stepped into the fly, attended by Pompey, to be driven to Great Wennock station; and on his way to it enjoyed the pleasure of that encounter with his rebellious daughter and her husband as they quitted St. Mark's Church after their second marriage.

To make things clear to you, my reader, it may be necessary to revert for an instant to the past.

Captain Chesney—we will speak of him by his old name, as it relates to the time he bore it—had four daughters, although you have only heard of three. He never had a son. Jane, Laura, Clarice, and Lucy were their names, Clarice being next to Laura. They were the two who seemed to stand together. Jane was considerably older, Lucy considerably younger, but Laura and Clarice were nearly of an age, for there was only a year between them. When they were growing up, promising both of them to be of unusual beauty, though they were not much alike, the dowager Countess of Oakburn, who, in her patronizing, domineering way, took a good deal of interest in her nephew Captain Chesney's family,

came forward with an offer to place them in France at her own cost for the completion of their education. Captain Chesney and Jane were too sensible of the advantages of such an offer to decline it, and Laura and Clarice were sent to France. When Lady Oakburn chose to do a thing, she did it well and liberally, and the small select Protestant school chosen, in the vicinity of Neuilly, was one in all respects eligible. The young ladies were well treated, well instructed, well cared for; and Laura and Clarice remained there for three years—Laura being nineteen, Clarice eighteen when they came back to England.

They returned to a less comfortable home than the one they had quitted in France; for the embarrassments of Captain Chesney's house—then situated, as you may remember, in the neighbourhood of Plymouth—were at that time reaching their climax. The petty debts perpetually being pressed for, the straitened comforts of the *ménage*, the almost entire deprivation, through poverty, of the society and amusement so longed for at their age, tried their patience and tried their tempers to the utmost. Jane bore all meekly for the sake of her father; Lucy was too young to feel it; but on Laura and Clarice it fell heavily.

Clarice was the first to break through the yoke. For two years she made the best of it; was in fact obliged to make the best of it, for what else could she do?—but shortly after her twentieth birthday had passed, she suddenly announced her intention of going out as a governess. Had she announced her intention of going round the country in a caravan to dance at fairs, it could not have been received with more indignant displeasure by her family.

Not by one of them only, but by all. Captain Chesney did not condescend to reason with her; he raved at her and forbade her. Jane reasoned; Laura ridiculed; but Clarice held to her purpose. That she had a strong will of her own, the contention proved; a will as strong and obstinate as Captain Chesney's. It was in complete opposition to the high notions, the long-cherished pride of the well-born family, that one of its daughters should lower herself to the position of a dependent—a governess—a servant, it might be said, to the caprices of strangers less well-born than was she. Clarice declared that she would be doing, as she believed, a right thing; her only motive was to *help* her family; first, by relieving them of her cost and maintenance; secondly, by applying part of her salary, if she should prove fortunate in getting a good one, to assist in the financial department at home.

That Clarice was sufficiently sincere in avowing this to be her motive, there was no reason to doubt, for she believed it to be the chief one. But had she been capable of strictly analyzing her own mind and feelings, it would perhaps have been found that she was

also swayed at least in an equal degree by the desire of getting into a home where there would be less of discomfort. Be this as it might, Clarice quitted her home in quite as much disobedience and defiance as Laura was destined subsequently to quit it. There had been a few weeks spent in disputes and useless opposition; Clarice on one side, the whole family on the other; it ended in one violent and bitter quarrel, and then Clarice left.

It might have been better had Lady Oakburn not interfered in it. She only added fuel to the flame. Kindness might have availed with Clarice; anger did not. And Lady Oakburn did not spare her anger, or her reproaches. It is true, that when she found these reproaches useless—that they only rendered Clarice more bent upon her plan—she changed her tactics and offered the young lady a home with her, rather than she should persist in what, according to their notions, reflected so much disgrace on the family. But it was then too late. Perhaps at no time would any one of the girls have been willing to accept a home with their domineering old aunt; and Clarice, in her high spirit, resented her present anger and interference too greatly to do aught except send back the offer, with something that, to the indignant countess, looked like scorn. In the last angry scene, the one that occurred just before Clarice left, she affirmed, that no disgrace, through her, should ever be cast upon the Chesneys; for she would change her name at once, and never betray her family to strangers. In her mad imprudence she took a vow so to act. In this mood she quitted her home; and Lady Oakburn immediately turned her anger upon Captain Chesney. He ought to have kept her in by force, had it been necessary, she said, and not have suffered her to leave home. It was next to impossible for Lady Oakburn not to vent her anger upon some one; but in this case the captain did not deserve it, for Clarice left the house in secret, and none knew of her departure until she had gone away.

Opposition was over then. Lady Oakburn, retreating into her pride, took no further heed of the matter or of Clarice; Captain Chesney virtually did the same, and forbade the name of his offending daughter ever to be mentioned. In vain Jane pleaded that Clarice might be sought out; might at least be seen after, and one more effort made to induce her to hear reason, and return home. Captain Chesney would not listen, and quarrelled with Jane for her persistency. It was the first coolness, the first unpleasantness, that had ever occurred between Jane and her father.

But, if they could only have put away the useless old family pride, there appeared to be no great cause for uneasiness on the score of Clarice and the step she had taken. A very short time after Clarice left home, Jane received a letter from her, telling her of her movements. She had obtained, she wrote, through an agency, a situa-

tion as governess, and had entered upon it. It was in a good family residing at the west end of London, where she should certainly be safe, and, she hoped, comfortable. She had changed her name, she added, though she should decline to say for what other; and if Jane wanted to write to her, she might send a letter directed to Miss Chesney, care of a certain library in the neighbourhood of Hyde Park. "Tell papa, with my love," ran the conclusion of the letter, "that he may thoroughly trust me in all ways; I will not disgrace myself or his name. What I have done, I have done from good and loving motives, and I hope that the time may come when he will think of me less harshly than he does now."

Jane showed the letter to her father. He flew into a paroxysm of anger, and sent a harsh message to Clarice, to the effect that she should never return home, and he would never forgive her; a message he compelled Jane to write. It would have the effect of hardening Clarice, as Jane knew; but she could only obey. And from that hour Captain Chesney had forbidden all mention of Clarice by Jane.

But surely Jane had now a right to expect that the change in their position would cause her father to recall Clarice. She was Lady Clarice Chesney now, and the incongruity of a young lady of title being out as a governess must surely strike Lord Oakburn. To hear him thunder out "No!" in answer to her appeal, with the words, "Let Clarice come to her senses," fell as a leaden weight on Jane's heart. Her private conviction was, that Clarice, obstinate in spirit and in temper, would never come to her senses of her own accord, unless they made the first move to bring her to them.

But Jane had not time just now to indulge her thoughts or her disappointment. In one week from that day, she and Lucy were to depart from their present home for Chesney Oaks, and there were innumerable things to see to, arrangements to be made. Lord Oakburn had brought with him more than sufficient money to satisfy all outstanding claims, and this he left in Jane's hands, desiring her to pay them. With what satisfaction Jane gazed at this money, let those who have been unwilling debtors picture to themselves. Ah, the change of position was little—the rank they had stepped into, the titles that must be theirs now for life—these were but little to Jane Chesney, as compared with this happy power to pay the creditors—and to be free from care!

With that delicacy of feeling which I think does in a large measure characterize the greater portion of people, not one creditor had presented himself at the door of Cedar Lodge since the change in Captain Chesney's fortunes. Of course there was a great deal in knowing that they were now secure. Jane was busy after breakfast giving directions in the house to Judith and the new woman-servant

who had been temporarily engaged. Later on, she called Judith into the room that had been Laura's, to help to collect that young lady's things together.

"It is surely not worth while putting in these old shoes and boots," remarked Jane, in the midst of the packing. "She will never wear them again."

The words were spoken to Judith. Judith, however, did not reply. She was standing at the window, looking out on the road.

"Judith."

Judith turned. "I beg your pardon, my lady. I was looking at a carriage that has stopped at the gate. There appears to be an old lady in it."

Lady Jane went to the window. It was the same carriage that had so nearly run over Mr. Carlton; the same that had pulled up at the Red Lion to inquire its way to Cedar Lodge. One glimpse was enough for Jane, and something like dismay mixed with surprise fell over her features.

"Oh, Judith, run! Run to receive her. It is my aunt, the dowager Lady Oakburn."

Judith did as she was bid. Jane hastily washed her hands, shook out the flounces of the new mourning worn for the late earl, glanced at the glass and smoothed down the braids of her fair hair—which never looked anything but smooth—and was below ere Lady Oakburn had entered the hall door.

She came in with short, quick steps, her high heels clattering on the flags of the hall. Although very stout, she gave one the idea of being a remarkably active woman—and in truth she was so: active in body, active in mind, active in tongue. And those active women wear well. Lady Oakburn with her seventy years, did not look more than sixty.

"And now, where's your father?" she began, before she had time to receive Jane's salute; and the sharp tone of her voice caused Jane to know that something had displeased her.

"Papa's gone to Chesney Oaks, Aunt Oakburn," answered Jane, meekly waiting to receive the kiss of greeting. "He left us this morning."

"Yes. Your servant has just told me so," was Lady Oakburn's answer. "And I should like to know what business he has to be darting about the country in this uncertain fashion? What took him off again so soon, pray?"

"Papa only came home to tell me of his plans and direct me what I was to do," replied Jane, in the deprecatory manner that habit, from early childhood, had rendered a matter of course to her. "He stayed here two nights."

The countess walked straight to an arm-chair in the drawing-room,

drew it in front of the fire, sat down, kissed Lucy, who came running up, took off her bonnet, and handed it to Jane to put down. She looked very cross.

"I reached Great Wennock last night on my way to Chesney Oaks, halted there, and slept. This morning, the first thing, I telegraphed to Chesney Oaks, asking whether the earl was there—your father. An hour ago the answer came back: 'The earl is at Cedar Lodge, South Wennock;' and I ordered a post-carriage at once. And now that I am here, I find him gone!"

"I am very sorry," said Jane. "Had it been yesterday, aunt, you would have found him."

"It is necessary that I should see him, Jane. Changes will have to be made at Chesney Oaks, and I intend to have a voice in them. Thoms! Where's Thoms?"

She suddenly jumped up from her seat, flung open the room door, and her servant came forward. "What have you done with the carriage!" she asked.

"It is at the gate, my lady.

"Good. Let it wait. And now, Jane, if you have a biscuit and a glass of wine to give me, I'll take it, for I shall go on to Chesney Oaks as quickly as I can. A little bread and butter will do, if you have no biscuits."

Jane hastily got her the refreshment. "We were so grieved, Aunt Oakburn, to hear of the earl's death," she said; "as we had been to hear of the young countess's. We did not know her; but Lord Oakburn——"

"Stay, Jane"—and the interruption was made in a tone strangely subdued, as contrasted with what had gone before it. "He was my grandson; I loved him for his dead father's sake; but he is gone, and I don't yet care to talk of him. He's gone, he's gone."

Jane did not break the silence. But Lady Oakburn was not one to give any time to superfluous emotion. She rapidly ate her biscuit, drank the wine, and called to Lucy to put down the glass.

"What are your father's plans, Jane? What does he mean to do with Chesney Oaks? He will not be rich enough to live at it."

"I believe he intends to let it, aunt."

"Let it! Let Chesney Oaks? That he never shall."

"What else can he do with it? As you say, aunt, he is not rich enough to live at it, and it would not do to let it lie empty, falling into decay through not being occupied."

Lady Oakburn lifted her hand. "To think that he should have succeeded after all! Sailor Frank! I never—Jane, I declare to you that I never so much as gave a thought to it, all through my long life."

"And I can most truthfully say that we did not," was Jane's answer.

"What are you going to do? You will not remain here long, I suppose?"

"We quit this for good in a week, and join papa at Chesney Oaks. After that I believe we shall go to London and settle there."

"Best plan," said Lady Oakburn, nodding her head. "London's best, if you can't live at Chesney Oaks. But Frank shall never let it. What shall you do with this furniture?" she added, looking round at the very plain chairs and tables. "It won't do for you now."

"We have the house on our hands for some time longer: it was taken on lease for three years. Papa says he shall let it furnished."

"And what of Laura?"

Jane's heart palpitated and her eyelids drooped, as the abrupt question was put to her. It was worse to talk of Laura to Lady Oakburn than to her father.

"It has been a terrible blow to us all," she breathed.

"Was she mad?"

"She was very foolish," answered Jane.

"Foolish!" returned the countess in exasperation. "You call an act such as that only foolish! Where did you learn morals and manners, Lady Jane?"

Jane did not answer.

"What sort of a man is he, that Carlton? A monster?"

"He is not one in appearance, certainly," replied Jane, and had the subject been less sad she would have smiled. "I did not like him; apart from this unhappy business, I did not like him. They returned last night, and were re-married here this morning, I understand," she added, dropping her voice. "I fear—I do fear, that Laura will live to regret it."

"It's to be hoped she will," said the countess, in just the same tone that Lord Oakburn might have wished it. "I saw my young lady just now."

"You saw her, aunt?"

"I did," said Lady Oakburn, nodding her head; "and she saw me. She was at the window of a house as I passed it; Mr. Carlton's, I suppose. Mark me, Jane! she will live to repent it; these runaway matches never bring luck with them. Where's Clarice?"

The concluding question was asked quite as abruptly as the one had been regarding Laura. Jane lifted her eyes, and the flush of excitement stole into her cheek.

"She is where she was, I conclude, Aunt Oakburn."

"And where's that? You may tell me all you know of her proceedings since she left home."

It was certainly condescending of the dowager to allow this, considering that, since the departure of Clarice from her home, she had never permitted Jane to mention her in any one of her letters.

"The 'all' is not much," said Jane. "You know that she sent us word she had entered on a situation in the neighbourhood of Hyde Park——"

"And that she had assumed a false name," interrupted the countess with acidity. "Yes, I know so much. Go on."

"That she had changed her name," said Jane, wincing at the plain statement of the case. "But she desired her letters to be addressed 'Miss Chesney;' therefore I cannot see how she can have wholly dropped it."

"Who would write to her, pray?"

"I did," said Jane. "I thought it well that we should not all abandon her——"

"Abandon her!" again interposed the countess. "I think it was she who abandoned us."

"Well—yes, of course it was—but you know what I mean, aunt. I wrote to her occasionally, and I had a few letters from her. Papa never forbade that."

"And what did she say in her letters?"

"Not much; they were generally short. I expect they were written just to tell me that she was well and safe. She gave scarcely any particulars of the family she was with, but she said she was as comfortable there, on the whole, she supposed, as she could expect to be. But I have not heard from her since the beginning of the year, and I am getting uneasy about it. My two last letters have brought forth no reply: and they were letters that required one."

"She's coming home," said the countess. "You'll see."

"I wish I could think so," returned Jane. "But when I remember her proud spirit, a conviction comes over me that she will never make the first move. She will expect papa to do it."

"Then she should expect, for me, were I her father," tartly returned the dowager, as she rose and put on her bonnet. "If she has no more sense of what is due to the Earl of Oakburn, and to herself as Lady Clarice Chesney, than to be out in the world teaching children, I'd let her remain out until her senses came to her."

Almost the same words as those used by the earl not many hours before. And the old Countess of Oakburn reiterated them again, as she said adieu to her grandnieces, and departed as abruptly as she had arrived.

CHAPTER XXVI.

MISS LETHWAIT.

In a magnificent reception-room in Portland Place sat the Earl of Oakburn and Lady Jane Chesney. It was the middle of June, and the London season was at its height. The whole of May, Lord Oakburn and his daughters had stayed at Chesney Oaks; he had now taken this house, furnished, for three months. Chesney Oaks was in the market to be let: to be let to any one who would take it and pay rent for it; and the countess dowager had worked herself into a fume and a fret when she first saw the advertisement, and had come down upon the earl with a burst of indignation, demanding to know what he meant by disgracing the family. The earl answered her: he was quite capable of doing it; and a hot, wordy war waged for some minutes between them, and neither would give way. The earl had reason on his side, though; if his means were not sufficient to keep up Chesney Oaks, better that he should let it than allow it to go to ruin.

So Chesney Oaks was in the market, and old Lady Oakburn told her sailor nephew that he deserved to have his ears boxed, that she should never forgive him, and then she withdrew in dudgeon to her house in Kensington Gardens. And the earl devoutly wished she might never come out of it to torment him again.

Indeed there was scarcely a poorer peer in England than the new Earl of Oakburn; but to him and to Jane this poverty was as riches. His net revenue would be little, if any, more than three thousand per annum; as to the rent he expected to get from the letting of Chesney Oaks, it would nearly all go in keeping the place in repair. Chesney Oaks had no broad lands attaching to it; the house was good, and the gardens were good; but these things do not yield large revenues. The furniture of Chesney Oaks was the private property of the late earl; it reverted to his grandmother, the old countess. Had the present earl pleased her—that is, had he not offended her by advertising the place—she would very probably have made him a present of it, for she was capable of generosity when it suited her; but when she found the house was irrevocably to be let, she, in a fit of temper, gave orders for it to be taken out, and it was now in course of removal. "I'll not leave stick or stone in the place," she had said to Lord Oakburn in the stormy interview alluded to above. "I wouldn't use them if you did," retorted the exasperated earl, "and the sooner the things are out, the better." For one thing, the house was in admirable repair;

the young earl had had it put into complete order twelve months before, on the occasion of his marriage. So the furniture passed out of Lord Oakburn's hands, when perhaps with a little diplomacy, which he was utterly incapable of exercising, it might have remained his; and the dowager was distributing it amidst her married daughters—who were too well off to care for it.

For a fortnight or more after Chesney Oaks was advertised, no one had applied for it. Then an applicant came forward. It was Sir James Marden, a gentleman who was returning to Europe after a long sojourn in the East, and who had commissioned his brother, Colonel Marden, to engage for him a suitable residence. It was natural that the colonel should wish to secure one in the vicinity of his own house; he lived at Pembury, and Chesney Oaks appeared to be the very thing, of all others. And the negotiations were proceeding satisfactorily.

The earl was talking to Jane about it now. He was no hard-bargainer. Generous by nature, he could not haggle, and stand out for pence, shillings, and pounds, as so many do. All he did, any transaction he might engage in, was set about in the most simple manner imaginable. It would have occurred to most people to employ an agent to conduct this business; it did not occur to the earl. He wrote the advertisements out with his own hand, and added to them his own name and address in full, as to where applications might be made. One or two interviews had taken place between him and Colonel Marden, who was staying with his family in town; and on the previous day to this morning on which the earl and his daughter were sitting together, Mrs. Marden had made her first call on Lady Jane, and they had grown in that short call quite intimate. Jane was now telling her father that she had promised to accompany Mrs. Marden to a morning concert that very day.

Jane was attired in mourning; a handsome black dress of a thin gauzy texture, ample and flowing. She was quiet and unpretending as ever, but there was a look of rest in her face now, that told of a heart at peace. The present life was a very haven to the care-worn Jane, nearly tired out, as she had been, with household contrivings, with the economies and embarrassments of former days. All Jane Chesney's longing visions seemed more than realized; visions which had been indulged for her father, not for herself; and they had been realized in a manner and to a degree that Jane had never dreamt of. He was at ease for the rest of his days, and she had nothing left to wish for. Into society Jane determined to go very little. To be her father's constant companion, except when he was at his club or at the House, was her aim. Formerly, household duties and Lucy's education called her perpetually from his side:

it should not be so now. No attractions of society, of pleasure, of the gay world without, should lure away Jane Chesney. She would remain her dear father's companion from henceforth, rendering his hours pleasant to him, taking care that things were well ordered in his home. Never perhaps has father been loved and revered as was this one by Jane Chesney; and as mistress of his plentiful home, as mistress of her own time, which she would dedicate to him, she seemed to have realized her Utopia.

Though talking with her father on the subject of Chesney Oaks and Sir James Marden's probable tenancy, an undercurrent of ideas was floating in Jane's mind. She was about to engage a governess for Lucy; that is, she was looking out for one; and on the previous day Mrs. Marden had mentioned a lady to her who was in search of a situation—one whom Jane thought would be likely to suit.

"You are quite sure, papa, that you have overcome your objection to our taking a resident governess?" Jane said to him, passing from the other subject. For it should be made known that the earl had declared, when Jane had first broached the matter, that he would have no strange women in his house, putting him out of his way: and he had very grumblingly conceded the point, upon Jane's assuring him that no governess should be allowed to do that in the remotest degree.

"Didn't I say so?" testily returned the earl, who had lost none of his abrupt manner. "Why do you ask me?"

"Because Mrs. Marden mentioned one to me, who is about to leave her present situation. By the description, I thought she appeared to be just the person we want for Lucy. If you have no objection, papa, I will inquire further about her."

"Lucy would have been just as well at school," said the earl.

"Oh, papa, no!" and Jane's tone was one of pain. "I should not like her to be moved from under my supervision. You know I have been as her mother ever since mamma died. Neither do I think you would like to part with her."

"Have it as you will," said the earl, his voice somewhat more conciliatory. "If you think the woman will do, let her sign articles."

Jane smiled. But before she could answer, a servant entered the room and said a lady was waiting to see her.

"Who is it?" asked Jane.

"I thought she said Miss Lethwait, my lady, but I am not sure that I caught the name rightly, though I asked twice," was the man's answer.

Jane left the room to receive her visitor. "Lethwait?" she repeated to herself. "Lethwait?—surely that was the name of the

governess mentioned by Mrs. Marden! I suppose she must have sent her here."

A tall and very elegant woman of seven or eight and twenty rose from her chair as Jane entered. In features she was plain, but there was something really magnificent about her dark eyes and hair, about her manner altogether. Jane bowed; and concluded she had been mistaken in supposing it to be the governess.

But the governess it was, Miss Lethwait. Mrs. Marden had informed her that she had spoken to Lady Jane Chesney on her behalf, and Miss Lethwait had deemed it best to call at once, lest some other applicant should supersede her. She was a clergyman's daughter she informed Jane, and had been trained for a governess. Her father had judged it better to give his children an education by which they might make their way in the world, she said, than to put by the money it would cost, to be divided amongst them at his death. It would be only a few hundreds at best, not sufficient to be of real use to them. Jane inquired why she was leaving her present situation, and was told that the amount of work was driving her away. She had five pupils, and taught them everything.

"You will require a large salary, probably?" Jane said, after a few minutes' pause, during which she had been thinking how much she should like to engage Miss Lethwait.

Miss Lethwait hesitated in her reply. She had been told by Mrs. Marden that Lady Jane had intimated she should not be able to pay a very high one.

"I receive eighty guineas where I am, madam," she at length answered. "But in consideration of there being only one pupil, I would willingly accept less. Were I to continue to work as I am doing now, I am sure that my health would seriously suffer. I am frequently up until past twelve, correcting exercises which I have not time to do during the day, and I am obliged to rise at six to superintend the practising."

Jane could with truth assure her that there would be no overworking in her home—if she came into it; and when Miss Lethwait quitted the house, she was engaged, subject to references.

She had barely gone when Mrs. Marden called, a pretty little woman with a profusion of auburn hair. Jane saw her with surprise. An appointment had been made for them to meet at half-past one, but it was yet only half-past twelve. Mrs. Marden had come to tell Jane she would probably receive a visit from Miss Lethwait. Jane replied that she had already been; and grew eloquent in her praise.

"I like her very much indeed," she said. "She appears to me to be well qualified in every way; an unusually desirable person to fill such a post. Mrs. Marden, I wonder you were not anxious to secure her for your own children!" she added, the idea striking her.

Mrs. Marden laughed. "The governess I have suits me very well," she answered. "She is not perfection; I don't know who is; you may not find Miss Lethwait to be so."

"No, indeed," said Jane.

"Miss Jones is patient and efficient," continued Mrs. Marden. "At least she is efficient while my children are at their present ages —scarcely out of the nursery; but she is not a finished linguist and musician, as is Miss Lethwait."

"I wonder," cried Jane, the thought striking her, "whether she is a daughter of the Reverend Mr. Jones, of South Wennock?"

"No, I am sure she is not. She observes a complete silence as to her relatives: never will speak of them. I once told her I did not believe Jones was her real name," continued Mrs. Marden, laughing. "She *said* it was; but I declare I would not answer for it. She acknowledged that there were circumstances connected with her family which rendered her unwilling to speak of them: and she has never done so. However, the lady who recommended her to me, a schoolmistress of position, answered for her thorough respectability, and so I am content to let Miss Jones keep her mystery."

The words had struck a chord in Jane Chesney's heart never wholly dormant. Was it possible that this governess could be her sister Clarice? *She*, as Jane had every reason to suppose, had changed her name when she left home, and she had repeated to Jane in her letters the assurance—reiterating it, half in anger, half in excuse, but wholly in earnest—that *never* through her should the name of that family be known.

"What sort of a lady is Miss Jones?" asked Jane, all too eagerly. "Is she young?"

"She is young, and very pretty. So pretty that were my sons grown up I might think her a dangerous inmate. Why?"

"And how long has she been with you?"

"How long?—nearly two years, I think," said Mrs. Marden, struck with Lady Jane's sudden interest, and wondering what could be its cause. "Why do you ask?"

Every word seemed to add to the probability. In a month's time it would be two years since Clarice quitted her home.

"Can you tell me her Christian name?" Jane asked, paying no attention to Mrs. Marden's question.

"Her Christian name?" repeated Mrs. Marden. "Well, now, it never struck me until this minute that I do not remember ever to have heard it. Stay! she signs her receipts for salary 'C. Jones;' I remember that. Possibly it may be Caroline."

"Do you suppose it is Clarice?" asked Jane, her lips parted with emotion.

"Clarice? It may be. But that is an uncommon name. May

I again inquire, Lady Jane, why you ask? You appear to have some interest in the subject."

"Yes," said Jane, recalled to a sense of the present. "I—I knew a young lady who went out as governess nearly two years ago, and I am wishing much to find her. I think—I *think* it may be the same."

"Was her name Jones?"

"No, it was not. But I believe that the young lady I mention assumed another name in deference to the prejudices of her family, who did not care that she, bearing theirs, should be known as a governess. Excuse my giving further particulars, Mrs. Marden; should Miss Jones prove to be the same, you shall hear them without reserve. Can you let me see her?"

"Whenever you please," was Mrs. Marden's answer. "Now, if you like. My carriage is at the door, and if you will come home with me and take luncheon, she will be at the table with the two eldest girls, for they make it their dinner. After that, we will go straight to the concert."

Jane needed no second invitation, but attired herself without delay. A thought crossed her as to whether this would not be incurring the displeasure of her father, who had so positively forbidden her to see after Clarice; but for once in her life Jane risked it. Though she would not disobey him so far as to commence a search in defiance of his expressed command that Clarice should be "left alone until she came to her senses," Jane was beginning to grow seriously uneasy respecting her wandering sister. It seemed very improbable that Clarice should have remained in ignorance of their change of position; why, then, did she not communicate with them?

Colonel Marden's residence in London, a house he had taken for the season, was in one of the terraces near Hyde Park; and Mrs. Marden and Jane were soon driven to it. A few minutes of suspense for Jane, and Mrs. Marden, accompanied by a young lady, came into the drawing-room.

"This is Miss Jones, Lady Jane."

With a beating heart—with lips that were turning to whiteness in the agitation of expectancy, Jane turned. Turned to behold—disappointment.

It was a very pretty, lady-like young woman, but it was not Clarice Chesney. A few moments elapsed before Jane recovered her calmness.

"I beg your pardon for troubling you, Mrs. Marden," she then said; "but this is not my friend. I have lost sight of a young lady who went out as governess," she added, by way of explanation to Miss Jones, in the innate good-breeding that never left her, "and I was wondering whether I might find her in you. I wish it had been so."

The subject was at an end. Poor Jane could not recover herself. She remained as one whose senses are lost.

"You are disappointed, Lady Jane!" exclaimed Mrs. Marden as they took their places in the carriage to be driven to the concert.

"I acknowledge that I am so," was the low-breathed answer.

"You will forget it in the treat that is in store for you," said Mrs. Marden.

And in truth, if musical strains in their greatest perfection, their sweetest harmony, can lure a heart from its care, it was the music they were about to hear that day.

And Jane was beguiled out of her trouble. Amongst the performers was that master of the harp, Frederick Chatterton, and as Jane listened to the brilliant playing, the finished touch, the sweet tones elicited from the instrument, she forgot even Clarice.

"Lucy must learn the harp!" were the first words she ejaculated when the concert was over.

"What did you say?" asked Mrs. Marden.

"I—I believe that I unconsciously spoke aloud. I should like my little sister to learn to play the harp."

"The most graceful instrument there is, and I think the sweetest," said Mrs. Marden warmly. "I told you you would have a treat."

As they were going out, moving with the throng, they encountered Miss Lethwait, who was there with her pupils. Jane addressed her, speaking more impulsively than was her wont.

"Do you teach the harp, Miss Lethwait?"

"I could teach it, madam," replied Miss Lethwait, after a momentary pause. "I learnt it, but have been out of practice for some years."

"Take my advice, Lady Jane," whispered Mrs. Marden, when Miss Lethwait was beyond hearing. "If you are thinking of your sister, as I conclude you are, have her taught by the master you have just heard. It will be money well laid out."

"I believe you are right," answered Jane.

She shook hands with Mrs. Marden outside, and proceeded home, alone and on foot. It was not far, when the crossing at the Oxford Circus was once accomplished. Those crossings were the worst interludes as yet in Jane's London life. As she went on, her brain was busy with many thoughts and themes. Miss Lethwait, the coveted governess for Lucy; the disappointment she had met with in Miss Jones; the doubt whether she should not venture to urge on her father the necessity there seemed for seeking out Clarice; all were floating together in her mind, presenting a thousand phases, as thoughts will do when the brain is troubled. And mixed up with them in the most incongruous manner were the enchanting music she had just heard, the strains of which lingered on Jane Chesney's ears.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE MISSING SLEEVES.

MR. CARLTON stood before the mantel-piece of his handsome drawing-room. He had come in from his round of afternoon visits, and ran upstairs in the expectation of finding his wife. She was not there, and he rang the bell. It was answered by Sarah, a damsel with rather an insolent face and a very fine cap worn behind instead of before.

"Is your lady not in?"

"Not yet, sir. She went out at three o'clock to pay visits."

"On foot?"

"Oh no, sir. The carriage was ordered round from Green's."

The girl, finding she was not further questioned, retired, and Mr. Carlton walked to the window, and stood looking from it, probably for his wife. His hands were in his pockets, and he was softly whistling. A certain sign with Mr. Carlton—this whistling—that he was deep in thought. Possibly the unpleasant idea that had crossed his mind once or twice lately, was crossing it again now—namely, that if he and his wife did not take care they should be outrunning their income. In good truth, Laura possessed innately little more notion of the value of money than did her father, and she was extravagant in many ways in her new home from sheer thoughtlessness, where there was not the slightest necessity that she should be so at all. This very fact of ordering round one of Green's carriages two or three times a week when she went out to pay visits, was a superfluous expense, for Laura could just as well have gone on foot, her visits being generally to friends in the vicinity of home. When she paid them in the country it was with Mr. Carlton. Two, three, four hours, as the case might be, would Laura be out in that carriage, keeping it waiting at different doors for her whilst she gossiped.

"Circumstances alter cases." The trite old saying could not have received a more apt exemplification than in the instance of Mr. Carlton and his wife. They had not done the most reputable thing in running away to be married without leave or licence. More especially so on the part of the young lady; and South Wennock would no doubt have turned the cold shoulder on her for a time, to show its sense of the irregularity, and vouchsafed her no visits, had she remained the obscure daughter of the poor post-captain. But Miss Laura Chesney was one person; the Lady Laura was another. That poor post-captain had become one on the proud list of British

peers, and his daughter, in right of her rank, was the highest dame in all South Wennock. In fact there was no other lady whose social position in any degree approached to it. And South Wennock went only the common way of the world, when it obligingly shut its eyes to the past escapade, and hastened to pay court to the earl's daughter. The Widow Gould had given it as her opinion at the inquest, you may remember, that Mr. Carlton's "cabrioily" was an element in his success; but the probabilities were that Mr. Carlton's bride would prove a greater one.

All the town—at least as much of it as possessed the right, or fancied they possessed it—flocked to pay court to the Lady Laura Carlton. Many of the county families, really of standing, drove in to call upon her and Mr. Carlton; people who would never have dreamt of according him the honour, had not his new wife been a peer's daughter. Had she been marshalled to church by her father and duly married, converted into a wife with the most orthodox adjuncts—three clergymen and twelve bridesmaids—her new friends could not have treated her with more deferential respect. Such is the world, you know. The Lady Laura Carlton was just now the fashion, and the Lady Laura was nothing loth to be so.

But, to be the fashion usually entails certain consequences in the shape of expense. Dress and carriages cost something. Laura, with her innate carelessness, ordered both whenever inclination prompted her, and Mr. Carlton was beginning to remember that they must be paid for. Passionately attached to his wife, he could not yet bear to give her a word of warning to be more careful, but he wrote to his father, and solicited money from him. Not a sum of money down: he asked for something to be allowed him annually —a certain fixed sum that he named: hinting that the wife he had married, being an earl's daughter, would cost him more to maintain suitably than a wife taken from an ordinary rank of life.

To this letter Mr. Carlton was daily expecting an answer. He had duly forwarded an account of his marriage to Mr. Carlton the elder; had written to him once since; but the senior gentleman had been remiss in the laws of good breeding, and had sent not so much as a single congratulation in return. In point of fact, he had not written at all. But Mr. Carlton was confidently expecting a reply to his third letter.

He had not long to wait. As he stood there at the drawing-room window, he saw the postman come up and turn in at the gate, selecting a letter from his bundle. There were two deliveries a-day from London—morning and evening; South Wennock, after a fight with the post-office powers, had succeeded in obtaining the concession at the beginning of the year. Mr. Carlton went down with a step so fleet that he opened the front door as the postman was about to ring at it.

The letter was from his father; he saw that by the handwriting; and the postman had turned back and was going out at the gate again when Mr. Carlton remembered something he wished to ask him, called, and followed him to the gate.

"Rodney, have you made any inquiry about that overcharge in the books sent to me the other morning?"

"We have had to write up about it, sir; it wasn't the fault of the office here," was the man's answer. "The reply will be down most likely to-morrow."

"I shan't pay it, you know."

"Very good, sir. If it's a wrong charge they'll take it off."

The surgeon had turned his attention to the letter, when a sound of carriage-wheels was heard, and he stepped outside the gate, thinking it might be his wife, driving up. It was not. The carriage, however, contained two ladies whom Mr. Carlton knew, and he saluted them as they passed. The next moment there came in view the inspector, Medler, walking with rapid strides. Had he been in pursuit of some runaway forger, he could scarcely have been advancing more eagerly. Catching Mr. Carlton's eye, he made a sign to him, and increased his pace.

"What now, I wonder?" muttered the surgeon to himself aloud: and his voice betrayed unconscious irritation. "Haven't they had enough of the matter yet?"

Mr. Carlton alluded to the very unsatisfactory matter of the death in Palace Street. Mr. Medler had not proved more clever in pursuing it than the inspector he had superseded, and he had been fain to give it up for the present as unfathomable. It was a warm day, for summer was in, and the inspector, a stout man, took off his hat to wipe his brows as he reached Mr. Carlton.

"We want you to be so good as to make the examination, sir, of a poor woman who's gone off her head, so as to give the necessary certificate, and Mr. John Grey will sign it with you," began the inspector, rather incoherent in his haste and heat. "We can't move her until we have it. It's the blacksmith's wife down Great Wennock Road."

"Very well," said the surgeon. "What has sent her off her head?"

"It's an old thing with her, I hear. Mr. Grey tells me she was obliged to be placed in confinement some years ago. Anyway, she's very violent now. You'll see her then, sir, some time this evening, and we'll have her moved the first thing in the morning? I ordered one of my men to come down to you before I left the station, but as I've seen you myself it's all the same. What glorious weather this is!"

"Very. We shall have a fine haymaking."

"By the way, Mr. Carlton, that affair seems completely to baffle us," resumed the inspector, halting again as he was about to continue his way.

"What affair?" asked Mr. Carlton.

"About that Mrs. Crane. I'm afraid it's going to turn out one of those crimes that are never unearthed—there have been a few such. The fact is, if a thing is not properly followed up at the time, it's not of much use to re-open it afterwards. I have often found it so."

"I suppose you have given this up, then?"

"Yes, I have. There seemed no use in keeping it open. Not but that in one sense it is always open, for if anything fresh concerning it should come to our ears, we are ready for it. It may come yet, you know, sir."

Mr. Carlton nodded assent, and the inspector, with all the speed of which he was capable, set off again in pursuit of his errand, whatever that might be. Mr. Carlton went indoors, turned into the dining-room, and broke open his letter. A dark frown gathered on his brow as he read it. Let us peep over his shoulder.

"DEAR LEWIS,—I will thank you not to trouble me with any more begging letters: you know that I never tolerated them. I advised you to marry, you say. True; but I did not advise you to marry a nobleman's daughter, and I should never have thought you foolish enough to do so. These unequal matches bring dissatisfaction in a hundred ways, as you will find—but that of course is your own and the lady's look-out. It is not my intention to give you any more money at all; and whether I shall leave you any at my death depends upon yourself. I am quite well again, and am stronger than I have been for years.

"Sincerely yours,

"*London, June*, 1848." "J. CARLTON.

Mr. Carlton crushed the letter in his hand with an iron pressure. He knew what that hint of inheritance meant—that if he asked for any again he would never touch a farthing of it.

"He has ever been a bad father to me!" he passionately cried: "a bad, cruel father."

The sight of his wife's hired carriage at the door interrupted him. He thrust the letter into one of his pockets and hastened out.

"I must manage to get along as well as I can," he thought, "but *she* shall not suffer. Laura, my dearest, I thought you had run away," he exclaimed, as she jumped lightly from the carriage with her beaming face, and caught his smile of welcome.

"Where do you think I have been, Lewis?"

"To a hundred places."

"Well, so I have," she laughed. "But I meant only one of those places. Ah, you'll never guess. I have been to our old home, Cedar Lodge. I had been paying visits on the Rise, and as I drove back the thought came over me that I would go into the old house and look at it. The woman in charge did not know me, and took me for a lady wanting the house. It's the servant they engaged after I left home, I found; she is to stop there until the house is let. It is in apple-pie order; all the old tables and chairs in their places, and a few new ones put in to freshen the rooms up. Only fancy, Lewis! the woman gave me a card with the Earl of Oakburn's town address upon it, and said I could write there, or apply here to Mr. Fisher, the agent, whichever was most agreeable to me."

Laura laughed merrily as she spoke. She had turned into the dining-room with Mr. Carlton, and was undoing her white bonnet-strings. He was smiling also, and there was nothing in his countenance to betray aught of the checkmate, the real vexation recently brought to him. Few faces betrayed emotion, whether of joy or pain, less than the impassive one of Mr. Carlton.

"I wonder the earl should attempt to let the house furnished," he remarked. "I have wondered so ever since I saw the board up, advertising it."

"Papa took it on a long lease," said Laura. "I suppose he could not give it up if he would. Lewis, what else do you think I have done?—accepted an impromptu invitation to go out to-night."

"Where to?"

"To that cross old Mrs. Newberry's. But she has her nieces staying with her, the most charming girls, and I promised to go up after dinner. Half-a-dozen people are to be there, all invited in the same unceremonious manner, and we are going to act charades. Will you come?"

"I will take you, and come for you later in the evening. But I have patients to see to-night."

Laura scarcely heard the answer. She had lost none of her vanity, and she eagerly made her way to her dressing-room, her head full of what her attire for the evening should be.

Throwing her bonnet, which she had carried upon her arm by its strings, on the sofa, slipping her shawl from her shoulders, Laura opened her drawers and wardrobe, and turned over dresses and gay attire. She was very excited. Loving gaiety much, any slight unexpected accession to it threw her almost into a fever.

"I'll wear this pearl-grey silk," she decided at length. "It will be quite sufficient mourning with a little black ribbon on the point-lace sleeves. Sarah must contrive it somehow. Where are they?"

The "where are they" applied to the sleeves just mentioned. A

pair of really beautiful sleeves that had belonged to Mrs. Chesney. Laura pulled open a drawer where her laces and fine muslins were kept, and turned its contents over with her white and nimble fingers.

"Now what has Sarah done with them?" she exclaimed as the sleeves did not make their appearance. "She is as careless as she can be. If they are lost——"

Laura flew to the bell, and rang it so sharply that it echoed through the house. Laura had inherited her father's impatient temper, and the girl hastened up; she knew that her mistress brooked no delay in having her demands attended to. This girl had been engaged as housemaid, but her mistress kept her pretty well employed about her own person. She entered the room to see drawers open, dresses and laces scattered about in confusion, and their owner watching for her in some excitement.

"Where are my point-lace sleeves?"

"Point-lace sleeves, my lady?" repeated Sarah, some doubt in her accent, as if she scarcely understood which were the point-lace sleeves. At least that was how Lady Laura interpreted the tone.

"Those beautiful sleeves of real point, that were mamma's," explained Laura angrily and impatiently. "I told you how valuable they were; I ordered you to be always particularly careful in tacking them into my dresses. Now you know."

"Yes, I remember, my lady," replied Sarah. "They are in the drawer."

"They are not in the drawer."

"But they must be, my lady," persisted the girl somewhat pertly, for she had as sharp a temper as her mistress. "I never put the laces by in any other place than that."

"Find them, then," retorted Laura.

The maid advanced to the drawer, and began taking up one thing after another in it, slowly and carefully; too slowly for the impatient Lady Laura.

"Stand aside, Sarah, you won't have finished by dinner-time, at that rate," she cried. And, taking the drawer with her own hands, she pulled it completely out, and turned it upside down on to the carpet. The sheet of newspaper at the bottom was shaken out with the rest of the contents.

"Now, put them back," said Laura. "You'll soon see whether or not the sleeves are there."

Sarah suppressed her anger; she might not give way to it if she cared to keep her place. She took up the sheet of paper, gave it a violent shake, which might be set down either to zeal in the cause or to anger, as her mistress pleased, and then stooped for the lace articles. Lady Laura stood by, watching the process, anticipating her own triumph and Sarah's discomfiture.

"Now, pray, are the sleeves there?" she demanded, when so few things remained on the floor that there could be no doubt upon the point.

"My lady, all I can say is, that I have neither touched nor seen the sleeves. I remember the sleeves, it's true; but I can't remember when they were worn last, or what dress they were worn in. If I took them out of the dress after they were used, I should put them nowhere but here."

"Do you suppose I lost them myself?" retorted Lady Laura.

Sarah did not say what she supposed, but she looked as though she would like to say a great deal, and that not of the civillest. As she gathered up the last article from the floor, which happened to be a black lace scarf, Lady Laura saw what appeared to be part of a note, that had been lying underneath the things. She caught it up as impatiently as her maid had caught up the scarf, and far more eagerly; the writing on it, seen distinctly, was arousing all the curiosity and amazement that her mind possessed.

She forgot the lost sleeves, she forgot her anger with Sarah, she forgot her excitement; or, rather, one source of excitement was merged into another, and she sat down with the piece of paper in her hand.

It was the commencement of a letter, written, as Laura believed, to her sister Jane, and was dated from London the 28th of the past February. The lower part of the note had been torn off, only the commencement of the letter and its conclusion on the reverse side being left. Laura knew the handwriting as well as she knew her own: it was that of her sister Clarice.

"I did not think Jane could have been so sly!" she exclaimed at length. "Protesting to me, as she did, that Clarice had not written to her since New Year's Day. What could be her motive for the denial?"

Laura sat on, the paper in her hand, and lost herself in thought. The affair, trifling as it was, puzzled her excessively; the few words on the note puzzled her; Jane's conduct in denying that she had heard, puzzled her. She had always deemed her sister the very essence of truth.

"People are sure to be found out," she exclaimed, with a laugh at her own words. "Jane little thought when she was packing my things to send to me that she dropped this memento amongst them. I'll keep it to convict her."

In turning to reach her desk she was confronted by Sarah, with the missing sleeves in her hand.

"I found them folded in your watered-silk gown, my lady, in the deep drawer," said the girl as pertly as she might venture to speak. "I did not put them there."

A sudden conviction came over Laura that she had put them there herself one day when she was in a hurry, and she was generous enough to acknowledge it. She showed the maid where to place certain black ribbons that she wished to have attached to them, and again turned to her desk. As the girl retired, Mr. Carlton's step was heard upon the stairs. Laura thrust the paper into her desk, and locked it again before he should come in, but he only went to the drawing-room.

A feeling, which Laura had never given herself the trouble to analyze, but which had no doubt its rise in pride, had prevented her ever speaking to her husband of her sister Clarice. Naturally proud and haughty, the characteristics of the Chesneys, she had not cared to confess to him, "I have a sister who is out in the world as a governess." When they—she and Mr. Carlton—should again be brought into contact with her family, as she supposed they should be sometime, and Mr. Carlton should find that there was another sister, whom he had not seen or heard of, it would be easy to say, "Oh, Clarice was away from home during papa's residence at South Wennock." It would not be correct to assert that Lady Laura Carlton deliberately planned this little matter, touching upon the future; she did not do so, but it floated through her mind in outline. Thus she never spoke of her sister Clarice, and Mr. Carlton had not the faintest suspicion that she had ever possessed a sister of that name. Laura supposed that Clarice was at home again with them long before this, and when she looked in the *Morning Post*, or other journal giving space to fashionable movements, a momentary surprise would steal over her at never seeing Clarice's name. Only that very day, she had seen them mentioned as attending some great flower-show: "The Earl of Oakburn and the Ladies Jane and Lucy Chesney," but there was no Lady Clarice. "Papa and Jane are punishing her for her governess escapade, and won't take her out this season," thought Laura. "Serve her right! It *was* a senseless trick of Clarice's ever to attempt such a thing."

Sarah, who, whatever her other shortcomings, was apt at the lady's-maid's duties imposed upon her by her mistress, soon brought back the dress with the sleeves and black ribbons arranged in it, and Laura hastened to attire herself. Very, very handsome did she look. Her beautiful brown hair rested in soft waves on her head, her cheeks were flushed, her fair neck contrasted with the jet chain lying lightly upon it. Laura, vain Laura, all too conscious of her own charms, lingered yet at the glass, and yet again; although perfectly aware that she was keeping dinner waiting.

She tore herself away at last, a brighter flush of triumph on her cheeks, and went down to the dining-room. Mr. Carlton was standing on the lower stairs near the surgery door, talking to some

applicant, and Laura looked at them as she crossed the hall, and heard a few words that were then being spoken by the man, who was no other than little Wilkes the barber.

"And so, sir, as Mr. John was unable to come, my wife would not have the other; she felt afraid, and said she'd make bold to send for Mr. Carlton. If you'd excuse the being called in at a pinch, like, and attend, sir, we should be very grateful."

"I'll be round in half-an-hour," was Mr. Carlton's answer. "She is quite right; it is *not* pleasant to be attended by one who has made so fatal a mistake; one is apt to feel that it might possibly be made again."

And Laura knew that they were alluding to Stephen Grey.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A FINE LADY.

In the same reception-room in Portland Place, in which you saw them a fortnight ago, again sat the Earl of Oakburn and his daughter Jane. Jane was knitting some wrist-cuffs for her father, her mind busy with many themes: as Jane's thoughtful mind was sure to be. She was beginning to doubt whether she should like the governess, who had entered on her new situation some ten days now: and she was deliberating how she should best introduce the subject she was determined to speak of that morning—Clarice. A whole fortnight had Jane hesitated, but the hesitation must have an end.

The earl was reading the *Times*. He was glancing over a short speech of his own, therein reported; for he had been on his legs the previous night, and given the Lords a little of his mind in his own peculiar fashion. A question had arisen in regard to the liberties of seamen in Government vessels, and the earl told the assemblage, and especially the Lord Chancellor, that they were all wrong together, and knew no more about the matter than a set of ignorant landlubbers could be expected to know.

"Papa," said Jane, knitting rapidly at the cuffs—the old sailor called them muffatees—"does it appear to you that Miss Lethwait will suit?"

"She'll suit for all I know," the earl replied. "Why shouldn't she suit?"

Jane was silent for a moment before making any answer. "I fear she is above her situation, papa: that we shall find her—if I may use the word—too pretentious."

"Above her situation?" repeated the earl. "How can she be above that?"

"Papa, I allude to her manner. I do not like it. Wishing to treat her with all courtesy as a gentlewoman, I made no arrangements for her sitting apart from us in the evening; but I must say I did not expect her to identify herself so completely with us as she is doing; at least in so short a time. When visitors are here, Miss Lethwait never seems to remember that she is not in all respects their equal; she comports herself entirely as if she were a daughter of the house, taking more upon herself a great deal than I think is seemly. She quite pushes herself before me; she does indeed."

"Push her back again," said Lord Oakburn.

"That is easier said than done, with regard to Miss Lethwait," replied Jane. "I grant that she is in manner naturally imperious, inclined to treat every one *de haut en bas*——"

"Treat every one how?" was the angry interruption. "Where's the sense of jabbering that foreign stuff, Jane; I thought you were above it."

"I beg your pardon, papa," Jane meekly answered, full of contrition for her fault, which had been committed without thought, for Lord Oakburn understood no language but that of his native land, and had little toleration for those who interlarded it with another. "It is evident that Miss Lethwait is by nature haughty, I was observing; haughty in manner; but I do consider that she forgets her position in this house in a way that is anything but agreeable. But that you are unobservant, papa, you would see that she does."

"Tell her of it," said Lord Oakburn, seizing his stick and giving a forcible rap with it.

"I should not much like to do that," returned Jane. "What annoys me is, that she does not feel herself what is becoming conduct, and what is not——"

"I don't see that there's anything unbecoming in her conduct," was the interruption. "She should not stop long with Lucy, I can tell you, if I saw anything of that sort in her."

"No, no, papa; there is nothing unbecoming in one sense of the word; I never meant to imply it. Miss Lethwait is always a lady. She is too much of a lady, if you can understand it; she assumes too much; she never seems to recollect, when in the drawing-room of an evening, that she is not one of ourselves, and a very prominent one. A stranger, coming in, might take her for the mistress of the house, certainly for an elder daughter. And when we are alone, papa, don't you note how familiar she is with you, conversing with you freely on all kinds of subjects, listening to you, and laughing at your stories of sea life?"

"She has a splendid figure," remarked the earl, not altogether, as Jane thought, *à propos* to the point. "And she talks sensibly—for a woman."

"Well, papa, I don't like her."

"Then don't keep her. You are the best judge of whether she's fit for her berth, or whether she is not."

"As governess to Lucy she is entirely fitted. I could not wish to find a more efficient instructress. Her mode of teaching, her training, her companionship, all appear to me to be admirable for a young girl."

"Let her stop on, then. Lucy's instruction is the chief point. As to a little pride or pretension, or whatever you may term it, it will do no harm. A wind in the topsails won't capsize the ship."

Jane said no more. Of course Lucy's instruction was of paramount importance, and Jane was not one to merge weighty matters in trifles. Lord Oakburn returned to his newspaper, and a pause ensued. Presently he spoke abruptly.

"When do you intend to see after Clarice?"

Jane's heart gave a great bound, and she dropped a needle in her consternation. So entirely taken by surprise was she, that she could only look up in silence. At that very moment she was trying to frame an inoffensive way of putting the self-same question—and now he had spoken it! The flush of emotion illumined her face, tingeing even her drooping eyelids.

"Papa! *may* I see after her? Will you allow it?"

"If you don't, I shall," said the earl.

"It is what I have been longing to do," returned Jane. "Every morning, for this long while past, I have been resolving to speak to you, papa; and every night, when night came, I have reproached myself for not having had the courage to do so. May Clarice come home again?"

"Well, I don't know what you may deem ship-shape, but in my opinion it is scarcely the thing for Lady Clarice Chesney to be flourishing abroad as a governess."

"It has been wrong all along; doubly wrong since the change in our position occurred. But, papa, I did mention her name to you at the time of Lord Oakburn's death," Jane deprecatingly added, as a reminder, "and you bade me be silent and let Clarice come to her senses."

"But she doesn't come to them, my Lady Jane," retorted the earl, giving a few exasperated raps with his stick to enforce his words,—a plaything he had by no means forgotten the use of. "Here are the weeks and months creeping on, and she never gives token that she has come to them, or that she is coming to them. Obstinate little minx!"

"Papa, it is possible that she may not have heard of the change in our position. It is very unlikely, certainly, that she should not have done so; but still it is just possible."

"Rubbish! it's not possible," cried the earl in his own domineering manner. "It is her pride that stands in the way, Jane; she has been holding a tacit battle with us, you see, waiting for us to give way first."

"Yes, I have thought that must be it. Clarice was always self-willed, the same as—as——"

"The same as who?" thundered the earl, believing that Jane was impertinently alluding to himself.

"As Laura, I was going to say, papa. Forgetting that you had forbidden her name to be mentioned before you."

Jane had indeed forgotten it. The earl's brow grew hot with anger, and he rose to pace the room, giving Jane a little of his mind, and the floor of his stick, some of his words being more suited to the quarter-deck of his old vessel in Portsmouth Harbour than to his London drawing-room.

"Don't you talk of Laura before me again, Jane. She has chosen her own home and abandoned mine; let her abide by it. But Clarice's sin was lighter, look you, and she shall be forgiven. I suppose you know where she is?"

"No, I do not, papa."

Lord Oakburn stopped in his walk: the denial had evidently surprised him.

"Not know!" he repeated, gazing sternly at Jane. "I was given to understand that you *did* know. Clarice writes to you."

"I do not know exactly where she is," explained Jane. "It is somewhere in the neighbourhood of Hyde Park, I believe, and I have no doubt she will be easily found. When I write to her, I send my letters to a library there, by Clarice's directions, and I should think they can give me her address. Oh, papa, I have so longed to go there and ask for it!"

"You can go now," bluntly rejoined the earl. "Shall you be an hour getting ready?"

"I shall not be five minutes," replied Jane, glad tears standing in her eyes, as she laid aside her work. Lord Oakburn rang the bell, and a man came in.

"The carriage for Lady Jane."

But before the servant could retire, Jane interposed. "Stay an instant, Wilson. Papa, I think I had better not take the carriage. I would rather go on foot quietly."

"Then you won't go quietly," returned the earl. "Do you hear, sir? What do you stand gaping there for? The carriage instantly for Lady Jane."

Wilson flew off as if he had been shot. The new servants had become accustomed to these explosions of the earl's; but, with all his hot temper, he was a generous master.

Jane, for once, did not give up her point without a battle. "Do consider it for an instant, papa; will it not be best that, under the circumstances, I should go quietly without the parade of servants and a carriage?"

"What do you mean by 'under the circumstances'?"

Jane unconsciously dropped her voice. "As Clarice has stooped to take upon herself the office of a governess, I think she should come away from her place in the same manner."

"No," said the earl decisively. "She shall come away as Lady Clarice Chesney."

"There is one thing to be remembered," observed Jane, feeling that further opposition would be useless. "She may not be able to come away with me. She may have to give warning first—a week or a month's warning."

The suggestion angered the earl, and he lifted his stick menacingly.

"Not leave without warning! Let them dare to keep her. Tell the people who she is. Tell them who I am, and that I demand her."

"Dearest papa," Jane ventured to remonstrate, "courtesy is due and must be observed towards Clarice's employers. She has undertaken to perform certain duties in their house; and to abandon them at a moment's notice may be scarcely practicable. They may concede the point to me as a favour, but it will not do to demand it as a right."

"But I want her here," said the earl, who, now that he had broken the ice, was longing for Clarice's return with all the impatience of a child.

"And so do I want her," returned Jane; "and I will bring her away with me if I can do so. If not, the period of her return shall be arranged."

Jane quitted the room. She put on her things, a white bonnet and black mantle trimmed with crape, and then went to the study where sat Lucy and Miss Lethwait: the former wishing that German had never been invented for her especial torment; the latter showing up the faults in a certain exercise in the most uncompromising manner.

"Oh, Jane! are you going out?" came the weary plaint. "You said I was to go with you to-day to the Botanical Gardens."

"Yes, later; I will not forget you."

"Lucy says you wish the hour for her walking changed, Lady Jane," spoke up the governess.

"I think it would be more agreeable to you and to her," said Jane, "now that the weather has become so hot. Lady Lucy is one who feels the heat much."

Jane was conscious that her tone was cold, that her words were

haughty. *Lady* Lucy! She could not account for the feeling of reserve that was stealing over her in regard to Miss Lethwait, or why it should be so strong.

She went down to the carriage, which waited at the door, and was driven away. A grand carriage, resplendent in its coroneted panels, its hammer-cloth, and its servants with their wigs, their powder, their gold-headed canes. Jane quite shrank from the display, considering the errand upon which she was bent.

She had no difficulty whatever in finding the library she was in search of, and was driven to it. But she had a difficulty in her way of another sort: *she knew not by what name to inquire for her sister.* Clarice had desired her to address her letters "Miss Chesney," but told her at the same time that it was not the name by which she was known. Jane went into the shop and the proprietor came forward.

"Can you tell me where a young lady resides of the name of Chesney?" she inquired. "She is governess in a family."

"Chesney?—Chesney?" was the answer, spoken in consideration. "No, ma'am; I do not know any one of the name."

Jane paused. "Some letters have been occasionally addressed here for her; for Miss Chesney; and I believe she used to fetch them away herself."

"Oh yes, that was Miss Beauchamp," was the answer, the speaker's face lighting up with remembrance. "I beg your pardon, ma'am; I thought you said Miss Chesney. The letters were addressed to a Miss Chesney, and Miss Beauchamp used to come for them."

Beauchamp! The problem was solved at once, and Jane wondered at her own stupidity in not solving it before. What more natural than that Clarice should take her second name—Beauchamp? She was named Clarice Beauchamp Chesney. And Jane had strayed amid a whole directory of names over and over again, without the most probable one ever occurring to her mind.

"Thank you, yes," she said; "Miss Beauchamp. Can you direct me to her residence?"

"No, ma'am, I really cannot," was the reply. "Miss Beauchamp was governess in two families in succession, both of them residing in Gloucester Terrace, but I do not think she stayed long with either. She was at Mrs. Lorton's first, and at Mrs. West's afterwards."

Jane had not known that; Clarice had never told her of having changed her situation.

"I suppose we must both be speaking of the same person," she suddenly cried. "Perhaps you will describe her to me?"

"Willingly," answered the librarian. And the description was so accurate that Jane instantly recognized it for her sister's.

"Miss Beauchamp disappeared from the neighbourhood suddenly

—as it seemed to me," he continued. "At any rate, she ceased coming here. We have two or three letters with the same address waiting still."

Jane wondered whether they could be those she had sent. She asked to see them, and he brought them forward: three. They were the same.

"I will take them away with me," said Jane.

The librarian hesitated at this—not unnaturally. "You will pardon me, I am sure, ma'am, if I inquire by what authority you would take them? Miss Beauchamp may call for them yet."

Jane smiled. "They were written by me," she said, tearing open one of the letters and showing him the signature. "And," she added, taking out her card-case and handing him a card, "that will prove that I am Jane Chesney."

The librarian bowed; and intimated that her ladyship was of course at liberty to do what she pleased with her own letters.

"Upon second thoughts, I will leave this one, the last written, and write upon it our present address," said Jane. "As you observe, Miss Beauchamp may yet call here."

Obtaining the address of the two families in which she was told Miss Beauchamp had served, Lady Jane quitted the shop, and walked on to Gloucester Terrace, ordering the carriage to follow her by-and-by. She reached the house occupied by the Lortons first, and inquired of a showy footman whether Mrs. Lorton was at home. The answer was given in the affirmative, but with some hesitation: it was earlier than the orthodox hour for receiving visitors, and the man probably doubted whether his mistress was presentable. Jane was shown into an excessively smart room, and after some delay an excessively smart lady came to her; but neither room nor lady possessed anything of refinement.

Jane had not given her name. "It is of no consequence: I am a stranger," she said to the servant when he inquired. Mrs. Lorton dropped Jane a swimming curtsey, and sailing to a large velvet ottoman in the middle of the room, took her seat upon it. Jane looked, as she ever did, a lady, and Mrs. Lorton was all smiles and suavity.

"I have called to inquire if you can kindly give me any information as to the present address of a young lady who lived with you as governess," began Jane. "A Miss Beauchamp."

Mrs. Lorton's smiles froze at the question. "I know nothing about Miss Beauchamp," she answered, somewhat rudely. "She did not behave well in my house, and it was a good riddance when she left it."

"Not behave well!" echoed Jane.

"No, she did not. She encouraged my son to pay her attention,

and when it was all found out she left me at a pinch without a governess. Perhaps you know her?"

"I do," answered Jane with cold dignity. She *knew* that Clarice was being traduced. "Miss Beauchamp is my sister."

"Oh!" said Mrs. Lorton; and there was a whole volume of contempt in the tone. The lady before her, who had caused her to dress herself in that inconvenient haste, was after all nothing but a governess's sister! Mrs. Lorton felt angry and vexed; and the expression her face assumed did not add to its beauty.

"I would not have troubled you," resumed Lady Jane, "but I do not exactly know where my sister is now, and I am in search of her. I inquired at a library where I know Miss Beauchamp used to deal, and they gave me your address, as one of the situations in which Miss Beauchamp had lived. If you can direct me to her present place of abode, I shall return you sincere thanks."

"I tell you I know nothing of her," repeated Mrs. Lorton. "Here, Harriet," she added, as a young lady as much over-dressed as herself entered the room, "here's that Miss Beauchamp's sister come to inquire after her. The idea of our knowing anything about her!"

"The idea!" repeated the young lady pertly to Jane. "When she left us, she took a fresh place a few doors further on. But she didn't stop there long."

"She was not suitable for a governess," said Mrs. Lorton. "She carried her head too high."

"I scarcely think she was," remarked Jane. "She was of good birth, and the consciousness of that may have caused her to—as you express it—carry her head high. Though unduly high I do not think she was capable of carrying it. When she quitted her home to become a governess, she made a firm determination to do her duty in her new life and adapt herself to its penalties. Our family was in straitened circumstances at the time; and Clarice—and my sister generously resolved to earn her own living, so that she might no longer be a burden upon it. Others, well born and connected, have done as much before her."

Mrs. Lorton threw back her head. "That is sure to be the case," she said in sneering tones of disbelief. "Half the young women on the governess list will assure you that they are of good birth, and only go out through family misfortunes—if they can get anybody to listen to them. What does the one say, that we have now, Harriet?"

Harriet, who was standing at the window, laughed—and there was the same sneering tone in its sound that was so disagreeable in the laugh of her vulgar mother.

"She says that her aunt—— Oh, mamma! here are visitors,"

broke off the young lady. "The most beautiful carriage has driven up to the door!"

Mrs. Lorton—forgetting her dignity—hastened to the window. Jane rose: it was not a pleasant atmosphere to remain in.

"You can then really not tell me anything as to Miss Beauchamp's movements?" she asked again of Mrs. Lorton; for somehow, a doubt was upon her whether the lady could not have said more had she chosen to do so.

"Now you have had my answer," said Mrs. Lorton. "And I think it the height of impertinence in Miss Beauchamp to send people here to my house about any concerns of hers."

Jane dropped a stately curtsey; her only leave-taking; and was turning to the door when it was thrown open by the footman.

"The Lady Jane Chesney's carriage!"

Mrs. Lorton was in a flutter of expectation. Could any Lady Jane Chesney be vouchsafing a call on *her?* Where was the Lady Jane? Was she coming up? The man was showing her unwelcome visitor downstairs; but his mistress called to him so sharply that Jane had to make her way out of the house alone.

"Has any visitor come in?"

"No, ma'am."

"No!" repeated Mrs. Lorton. "What did you mean then? Whose carriage is that? You came and announced Lady somebody."

"I announced the carriage, ma'am, for the lady who was here," returned the man, wondering at the misapprehension. "The footman said he had called for his lady, the Lady Jane Chesney."

Mrs. Lorton gave a great gasp. *She* Lady Jane Chesney! She flew to the window just in time to catch a glimpse of Jane's black skirts as she took her seat in the carriage. She saw the earl's coronet on it; she saw the servant step nimbly up behind and lay his gold cane slantwise. Mrs. Lorton had made a horrible mistake.

"Oh, Harriet! what can we do?" she exclaimed in a faint voice.

"Mamma, I thought, I did indeed, that she looked like a lady! Lady Jane Chesney! What will she think of us?"

Mrs. Lorton was unable to say what, and sat down in an agony. Her life, of late years, had been spent in striving to get into "society." And she had for once had a real live earl's daughter in her drawing-room, and had insulted her!

"How could poor Clarice have stayed in that family for a day!" thought Jane.

CHAPTER XXIX.

AN OMINOUS SHADOW.

LADY JANE was next driven to the other address, Mrs. West's. The lady was at home, and Jane found her a very different person from Mrs. Lorton: a kind, cordial, chatty little woman, without pretence or form; a lady too. Mr. West was engaged in some City business, and neither he nor his wife aspired to be greater and grander than they were entitled to be.

"Miss Beauchamp came to us from the Lortons," she said, when Jane had explained her business. "We liked her very much, and were sorry to lose her, but——"

"I beg your pardon," interrupted Jane. "Can you tell me why Miss Beauchamp left her situation at the Lortons?"

"Yes," answered Mrs. West, with a merry laugh. "She had scarcely entered their house when that vulgar son of theirs—and indeed I am not in the habit of backbiting, but he *is* vulgar—began to push his admiration upon her. She bore with it for some time, repelling him as she best could; but it grew unbearable, and Miss Beauchamp felt compelled to appeal to Mrs. Lorton. Mrs. Lorton did not behave well in it. She took her son's part, and wished to lay the blame on Miss Beauchamp; Miss Beauchamp was naturally indignant at this, and insisted on quitting the house on the self-same day. Mrs. Lorton then came round, tried to soothe Miss Beauchamp, and offered her an increased salary if she would remain."

"But she did not do so?"

"Certainly not. Miss Beauchamp came to me, telling me what had occurred, and I was only too glad to engage her at once as governess to my children. We had a little acquaintance with the Lortons, and I had seen Miss Beauchamp several times, and liked her. She came into this house straight from the Lortons when she quitted them, and very pleased we were to secure her."

A different account, this, from the one given by Mrs. Lorton; but Jane had felt certain the other was not strictly in accordance with truth.

"How long did Miss Beauchamp remain with you?" she inquired.

"Only a short time. She had been with us about six months, when she told me she must give warning to leave. I was so surprised; so sorry."

"Why did she give warning? From what cause?"

"She did not say what, and I could not draw it from her. Miss

Beauchamp was invariably reserved as to her private affairs, her family and all that; though open as the day in regard to general matters. All she said was, that she *wished* to leave; and when I pressed her to state frankly whether there was anything in my house that she disliked or wished altered, she answered that she was perfectly happy in it: and, but for compelling circumstances (I remember the expression still), should not have thought of leaving it."

"And did she quit it instantly; that day; as she had Mrs. Lorton's?"

"No, no," said Mrs. West. "It was a month's warning that she gave me, and she remained until its close. Then she left us."

"Where did she go to then?"

"We never knew. There appeared, as it seemed to us, some little mystery connected with it:—though in truth that may have been only fancy on our part. Many a governess when quitting her situation does not deem it necessary to proclaim her future movements to those she leaves behind her."

"In what way did there seem to be a mystery connected with it?" asked Jane.

"Well, I can hardly describe it to you," was the frank reply. "We fancied it chiefly, I believe, from Miss Beauchamp's entire silence as to her future proceedings. I told her I should be happy to be referred to; but she replied that she had no intention of taking another situation, and therefore should not require a reference."

"What was she going to do, then?" asked Jane in amazement.

"I am unable to say. I remember we wondered much at the time. She had never spoken of her family, and we picked up the notion, though it may not have been a correct one, that she was without relatives. An impression arose amongst us that she was going to be married."

"To be married?" echoed Jane, her pulses quickening.

"We had no real reason for thinking it," continued Mrs. West. "I put the question to her, I remember, whether she was about to take up her abode with relatives, and she laughed and said, No, she was going to embark in a new way of life altogether."

"It is very strange!" exclaimed Lady Jane. "Do you not know where she went to when she quitted your house?—where she drove to, for instance? Whether she went into the next street?—whether she went into the country?—in short, what her immediate movements were?"

"I would tell you in a moment, if I knew; but I never have known," replied Mrs. West. "She went away in a cab with her luggage, not stating where. We thought it strange that she should preserve to us this reticence: we had been so very intimate together. We all liked Miss Beauchamp very much indeed, and had treated her entirely as a friend,"

"Did she seem to be in good spirits when she left you?"

"Quite so; she was as gay as possible, and said she should come back and see us some time. You seem very anxious," added Mrs. West, noting her visitor's perplexed brow.

"I am indeed anxious," was the answer. "How long do you say this was ago?"

"It was last June. Twelve months ago exactly."

"And you have never since seen her, or heard from her?"

"Never at all. We have often wondered what has become of her."

"I must find her," exclaimed Jane in some excitement. "As to her having married, that is most improbable; she would not be likely to enter on so grave a step without the knowledge of her family. At least, I—I—should think she would not," added Jane, as a remembrance of Laura's disobedient marriage arose to her mind, rendering her less confident. "I may as well tell you who Miss Beauchamp is," she resumed; "there is no reason why I should not do so. My father, a gentleman born and highly connected, was very poor. There were four daughters of us at home, and Clarice, the third——"

"Then—I beg your pardon—you are Miss Beauchamp's sister?" interrupted Mrs. West quickly.

"Yes. Clarice took a sudden determination to go out as governess. She had been highly educated, and so far was well qualified for the work; but her family were entirely against it. Clarice persisted; she had but one motive in this, to lessen expenses at home: a good one, of course, but my father could not be brought to see it. He said she would disgrace her family name; that he would not have a daughter of his out in the world—a Chesney working for her bread. Clarice replied that no disgrace should accrue to the name through her, and she, in spite of all our opposition, quitted home. She went, I find, to the Lortons first, calling herself Miss Beauchamp; she had been christened Clarice Beauchamp; Clarice, after her great-aunt, the Countess of Oakburn; Beauchamp, after her godfather."

"Then she is not Miss Beauchamp?"

"She is Lady Clarice Chesney."

Mrs. West felt excessively surprised. Like her neighbour Mrs. Lorton, she had not been brought into familiar personal contact with an earl's daughter—except in waxwork.

"I have the honour then of speaking to—to——"

"Lady Jane Chesney," quietly replied Jane. "But when Clarice was with you she was only Miss Chesney; it is only recently that my father has come into the title. You will readily imagine that we are most anxious now to have her at home, and regret more than before that she ever left it."

"But—am I to understand that you do not know where she is?

—that she has not been home since she left us last June?" exclaimed Mrs. West in bewilderment.

"We do not know where she is. We do not know now where to look for her."

"I never heard of such a thing."

"Until to-day I took it for granted that she was still in a situation in this neighbourhood," explained Jane. "My father's displeasure prevented my seeing personally after Clarice; in fact, he forbade my doing so. When I came out from home to-day I fully expected to take her back with me: or, if that could not be, to fix the time for her return. I never supposed but that I should at once find her; and I cannot express to you what I felt when the proprietor of the library, where I used to address my letters to Clarice, told me Miss Beauchamp had left the neighbourhood;—what I feel still. It is not disappointment; it is a great deal worse. I begin to fear I know not what."

"I'm sure I wish I could help you to find her!" heartily exclaimed Mrs. West. "Where *can* she be? She surely cannot know the change in her position!"

"I should imagine not," replied Jane. "Unless—but no, I will not think that," she broke off, wiping from her forehead the dew which the sudden and unwelcome thought had sent there. "Unless Clarice should have married very much beneath her, and fears to let it be known to us," was what she had been about to say

"It has occurred to us sometimes that Miss Beauchamp might have taken a situation abroad; or with a family who afterwards took her abroad," said Mrs. West. "What you say now, Lady Jane, renders it more than ever probable."

Jane considered. It was certainly the most probable solution of the puzzle. "Yes," she said aloud, "I think you must be right. It is more than likely that she is abroad in some remote continental city. Thank you for your courtesy in giving me this information," she added, as she rose and laid a card on the table with her address upon it. "Should you at any time obtain further news, however slight, you will, I am sure, be kind enough to forward it to me."

Mrs. West gave a promise, and Jane went out to her carriage with a heavy heart. It was a most unsatisfactory story to carry back to Lord Oakburn.

Another carriage, with its hammer-cloth and its coronets and its attendant servants, and above all, its coat of arms, that of the Oakburn family, was at the door in Portland Place when Jane's drew up. It was Lady Oakburn's. Jane went into the hall; and sounds, as of voices in dispute, came from the room where she had left her father in the morning. The earl and his old dowager aunt were enjoying one of their frequent differences of opinion.

Lucy came running downstairs. "Have you come back to take me out, Jane?"

Jane stooped to kiss her. "My dear, you know that I never willingly break a promise," she said, "but I almost fear that I must break mine to you to-day. I am not sure that I can go to the botanical fête. I have heard bad news, Lucy; and I shall have to tell it to papa in the best way that I can. But, if I don't take you to-day, I will take you some other day."

"What is the bad news?" asked the child with all a child's curiosity.

"I cannot tell it you now, Lucy. Go back to Miss Lethwait. How long has Aunt Oakburn been here?"

"Ever so long," was Lucy's lucid answer. "She is quarrelling with papa about Clarice."

"About Clarice!" involuntarily repeated Jane. "What about Clarice?"

"I was in the room with papa and Miss Lethwait when Aunt Oakburn came——"

"What took you and Miss Lethwait to it?" interrupted Jane.

"We went in to get those drawings; we did not know papa was there; and he kept us talking, and then Lady Oakburn came in. Jane, she looked so angry with papa, and she never said Good morning to him, or How do you do, or anything, but she asked him whether he was not ashamed of himself to let Clarice be abroad still as a governess; and then they began to quarrel, and Miss Lethwait brought me away."

"How strange that they should all be suddenly wanting to bring home Clarice when we cannot find her!" thought Jane.

She motioned Lucy upstairs to the study, and entered the drawing-room. Lord Oakburn stood in the middle of the floor, his tongue and his stick keeping up a duet; and the dowager—her black bonnet awry, her shawl thrown on a neighbouring chair, and her cheeks flushed—was talking quite as angrily and more loudly than the earl. They had strayed, however, from the first matter in dispute—Clarice; had entered, in fact, upon at least a dozen others; just now the point of debate was the letting of Chesney Oaks, which had finally been taken by Sir James Marden.

Jane's entrance put an end to the fray. The earl dropped his voice, and Lady Oakburn pulled her bonnet straight upon her head. These personal encounters were in truth so frequent between the two, that neither retained much animosity afterwards, or indeed much recollection of what the particular grievance had been or the compliments they had mutually paid each other.

"Well, and where is she?" began the earl to Jane.

Jane knew only too well to whom he alluded. The presence of the dowager made her task all the more difficult; but she might

not dare to temporize with her father, or hide the fact that Clarice could not be found. She did not, however, reply instantly, and the earl spoke again.

"Have you brought her back with you?"

"No, papa. I——"

"Then I'll have the law of the people!" thundered the earl, working his stick ominously. "Here's your aunt come down now with her orders about Clarice,"—with a fierce flourish towards the angry old lady. "As if I did not know how to conduct my own affairs as well as any interference can tell me!"

"No, you don't, Oakburn. You don't!"

"And as if I should not conduct them as I please without reference to interference," continued the earl aggravatingly. "She's my daughter, madam; she's not yours."

"Then why didn't you prevent her going out at all? Why didn't you drag her back with cords?" retorted the dowager, nodding her bonnet at her adversary. "I would; and I have told you so ten times over. What does Clarice say for herself?" she added, turning sharply upon Jane. "Why didn't she come home of her own accord, without waiting to be sent for? She has the Chesney temper, and that's an obstinate one. That's what it is."

"Aunt," said Jane faintly,—"Papa," she said, scarcely knowing which of them to address, or how to frame her news, "I am sorry to say that I cannot find Clarice. She—I——"

They both interrupted her in a breath, turning their anger upon Jane. What did she mean by "not finding" Clarice, when she had said all along that she knew where she was?

Poor Jane had to explain. That she *had* thought she knew were Clarice was; but that Clarice was gone: she had been gone ever since last June. Bit by bit the whole tale was extracted from Jane; the mystery of Clarice's leaving Mrs. West's so suddenly (and it really did look something of a mystery), and her never having been heard of since.

To describe the earl's dismay would be a difficult task. When he fully comprehended that Clarice was lost—lost, for all that could be seen at present—his temper quite gave way. He stormed, he thumped, he talked, he abused the scapegoat Pompey, who had had nothing in the world to do with it, but who happened unluckily to come into the room with an announcement that luncheon was ready; he abused Lady Oakburn, he abused Jane. For once in her life the dowager let him go on to his heart's content without retorting in kind. She had in truth her grand-niece's welfare at heart, and the news Jane had brought terrified her. Lunch! No; they were in too much perplexity, too much real care, to sit down to a luncheon-table.

"I have contained myself as long as I could," cried the dowager, flinging back the strings of her bonnet, and darting reproachful looks at Lord Oakburn. "Every week since you came to London have I said to myself on the Monday morning, He'll have her back this week; but that week has gone on like the others, and he has not had her back—you, Oakburn!—and I said to myself, as I sat down to my breakfast this day, I'll go and ask him what he thinks of himself. And I've come. Now, then, Oakburn!"

Poor Jane, utterly powerless to stem the raging spirits of the two, remembered that Lady Oakburn had been as ready as the earl to leave Clarice to herself: to say that she ought to be left to herself, unsought, until she should "come to her senses."

"I want Clarice," continued the dowager, while the earl marched to and fro in the room, brandishing his stick. "I'm going away next month to Switzerland, and I'll take her with me, if she behaves herself and shows proper contrition for what she has done. As to your not finding her, Jane, that must be nonsense: you always were good for nothing, you know."

"Dear aunt, the case is this," said Jane in sadly subdued tones. "Perhaps you do not quite understand it all. I should not think so much of Clarice's not having been, or sent, to Mrs. West's since she left them; but what I do think strange is, that she should not have called or sent as usual for my letters. All the letters I have written to her since Christmas, three, were lying at the library still. I have brought two of them away with me, leaving the other, in case she should still call."

"What has made her leave the letters there?" cried the dowager.

"It is that which I cannot understand. It is that which—I don't know why—seems to have struck my heart with fear."

Lady Oakburn interrupted impatiently. "I don't understand it at all, Jane. Perhaps you'll begin at the beginning and enlighten me."

"What beginning?" asked Jane, uncertain how to take the words.

"What beginning!" echoed the exasperated old lady. "Why, the beginning of it all, when Clarice first went out. I know nothing about the particulars; never did know. What letters did you send to her, and what answers did you get?—and where did she hide herself, and what did she tell you about it? Begin at the beginning, I say."

"It will be two years next month, July, since Clarice left us," began Jane, with her customary obedience. "Some time in the following month, August, I received the first letter from her, telling me she had found a situation in the neighbourhood of Hyde Park, and that she would"—Jane hesitated a moment, but went on—"keep her vow."

"Her vow! What vow?"

"She took a vow before leaving home, that she would never betray our name as connected with herself."

"Oh!" said the countess. "She took it in a passion, I suppose."

"Yes. She said she hoped the situation would prove a comfortable one, and that if I liked to write to her, I might address my letters 'Miss Chesney,' to be kept at a certain library in the neighbourhood, where she would call for them; but she again repeated that she was not known by her own name. I did write to her; three or four letters in the course of the next twelvemonth; and she answered them. She never told me she was not in the same situation, and I concluded she was there. Summer weather had come round then——"

"Get on with your story, Jane. What has summer weather got to do with it?" was the old lady's angry reprimand. And Lord Oakburn had stopped his restless walk to listen.

"In that summer—I think it was in June—I had another letter from Clarice, telling me not to write until I heard from her again, as she might be going to the seaside. Of course I supposed that the family were going to take her. This, you observe, was the month when, as Mrs. West says, she left them. I heard nothing more until the next January, when she wrote to wish us the *bonne année*, a custom she had learnt in France; and that letter was forwarded to South Wennock from our old home at Plymouth. I——"

"Stop a bit," said the dowager. "What did she say of herself and her movements in that letter?"

"Really nothing. She did not say a word about the seaside journey, or that she was back in London, or anything about it. She tacitly suffered me to infer—as I did infer—that she was still with the same family. The letter bore the London postmark. She said she was well and happy, and asked after us all; and there was a short postscript to the letter, the words of which I well remember, —'I have kept my vow.' I showed this letter to papa, and he——"

"Forbade you to answer it," interrupted the earl, for Jane had stopped in hesitation. And the old countess nodded her approval —as if *she* should have forbidden it also.

"So that letter was not answered," resumed Jane. "But in the next March, I—I—a circumstance occurred to cause me to feel anxious about Clarice, and I wrote to her. In fact, I had a dream, which very much——"

"Had a what?" shrieked the countess.

"I know how foolish you must think me, aunt. But it was a dreadful dream; a significant, strange, fearful dream. It seemed to forebode ill to Clarice, to shadow forth her death. I *am* superstitious with regard to dreams; I cannot help being so; and it made

a great impression upon me. I wrote then to Clarice, asking for news of her. I told her we had left Plymouth, and gave her the address at South Wennock. No reply came, and I wrote again. I wrote a third time, and still there was no answer. But I did not think much of that. I only thought that Clarice was angry at my not having answered her New Year's letter, and would not write, to punish me. To-day, upon going to the library, I found those three letters waiting there still: not one of them had been called for by Clarice."

"And the people she was with say Clarice left them last June!—and they don't know what place she went to, or where she is?" reiterated the earl, while the old dowager only stared in discomposure.

"They know nothing of her whatever, papa, or of her movements since then."

"Why, that's a twelvemonth ago!"

Yes, it was a twelvemonth ago. They, the three, stood looking at each other in silence; and a nameless fear, like a shadow of evil, crept over them, as the echo of the words died away on the air.

CHAPTER XXX.

A TEMPTING BAIT.

THERE was a crash of carriages at one of the houses in Portland Place; and as the doors were flung open ever and again to the visitors, the glare of many lights, the strains of music, the sweet perfume from the array of hot-house flowers on the staircase, struck dazzlingly to the charmed senses of the beautiful forms, gay as butterflies, fluttering in. The Earl of Oakburn and Lady Jane Chesney were holding an evening reception.

Their first that season, and their last. And yet, scarcely to be called "that season"; for the season was almost over. In an ordinary year it would have been quite over, for August had come in, and numbers were already on the wing to cooler places, panting from the heat and dust of the close metropolis; but Parliament had sat late, and many lingered still.

Jane had urged on the earl the necessity (she had put it so) of their giving one of these receptions. She had accepted invitations to a few; the earl to a very few; and she thought they should make a return. But such a thing was very much out of Lord Oakburn's line—for the matter of that, it was not in Jane's—and he had held out against it. Quite at the last moment, when three parts of the world had quitted London, the earl surprised Jane one morning by

telling her she might "send out and invite the folks," and then it would be done with.

They were somewhat more at ease with regard to Clarice. Somewhat. Every possible inquiry that the earl could think of had been set on foot to find her, and the aid of the police had been called in. Day after day, hour after hour, had the old Countess of Oakburn come down to Portland Place, asking if she was found, and worrying the earl well-nigh out of his senses. She threw all the blame upon him; she told him any father but he would have confined her as a lunatic, rather than have suffered her to be out without knowing where; and Jane was grievously reproached for her share, in assuming that Clarice was in the situation in the vicinity of Hyde Park, when it turned out that she had been some twelve months gone from it.

But still they were more at ease—or tried to feel so. In the course of their researches, which had extended to every likely quarter, they learnt the fact that one of the governess-agencies had procured a situation some ten months previously for a Miss Beauchamp. She had gone out to be governess in an English family of the name of Vaughan, who had settled in Lower Canada. The lady was described as young, nice-looking, and of pleasing manners; and she had told the agent that she had no relatives in England to consult as to her movements; altogether there did seem a probability of its being really Clarice. The Earl of Oakburn, in his impetuous fashion, assumed it to be so without further doubt, and Jane hoped it.

Then there was a lull in the storm of suspense. Miss Beauchamp —the supposed Clarice—was written to; not only by Jane, but by those who were making official inquiries on Lord Oakburn's part; they were tolerably at their ease until answers should arrive, and were at liberty to think of other things. It was during this lull that Lord Oakburn told Jane she might hold her reception.

And this was the night: and the rooms, considering how late was the month, August, were well filled, and Jane was doing her best, in her ever-quiet way, to entertain her guests, wishing heartily, at the same time, that the thing was over.

In a pretty dress of white crape, a wreath of white flowers confining her flowing curls, sufficient mourning for a child, stood Lucy Chesney, her eyes beaming, her damask cheeks glowing with excitement. Perhaps Jane was not wise in suffering Lucy to appear: some of the people around would have reproached her that it was not "the thing," had they dared to do so; but Jane, who knew little of fashionable customs, had never once thought of excluding her. One of the rooms had been appropriated to dancing, and Lucy, a remarkably graceful and pretty girl, had found partners

hitherto, in spite of her youth. Not a single dance had she missed; and now, after a waltz that had whirled her giddy, she leaned against the wall to regain breath.

"Just look at that child! How can they let her dance like that?"

The words reached Jane's ears, and she turned to see what child could be meant. Lucy! But she might have divined it, for there was no other child present. Jane went up to her.

"You are dancing too much, Lucy. I wonder Miss Lethwait is not looking after you. Where is she?"

"Oh, thank you, Jane, but I don't want looking after," was the reply, the child's whole face sparkling with pleasure. "I never was so happy in my life."

"But you may dance too much. Where is Miss Lethwait?"

"Oh, I have not seen her for ever so long. I think she is with papa in his smoking-room."

"With papa in his smoking-room!" echoed Jane.

"Well, I saw her there once: we have had three dances since that. She was filling papa's pipe for him!"

"Lucy!"

"It is true, Jane. Papa was cross; saying that it was a shame that he could not smoke his pipe because the house was full, and Miss Lethwait said, 'You shall smoke it, dear Lord Oakburn, and I'll keep the door;' and she took off her gloves and began to fill it. I came away then."

Jane's brow darkened. "Had you gone into the room with Miss Lethwait?"

"No; I was running about from one room to another, and I ran in there and saw them talking. Jane! please don't keep me! They are beginning another dance, and I am engaged for it."

Lord Oakburn's smoking-room was a small den at the end of a passage. But though small, Jane had deemed it might be found useful to-night, and it had been converted into a reception-room. In it stood the governess, Miss Lethwait. She looked magnificent. Of that remarkably pale complexion which lights up so well, her eyes sparkling, her beautiful hair shining with the purple of a raven's wing, the plainness of her features—and they were plain—was this night eclipsed. She wore a low white evening dress trimmed with scarlet, showing to the best advantage her white neck, her drooping shoulders, her rounded arms. Never had she appeared to so great advantage. Taking her altogether, no form in the room could vie with hers. She looked made to adorn a coronet—and perhaps she was herself thinking so.

Perhaps some one else was thinking so. One who could think, so far as that opinion went, to more purpose than Miss Lethwait herself—the Earl of Oakburn. The rough old tar stood near her,

and his eyes ranged over her with much admiration. He had not lost his liking for a fine woman, although he was verging on his sixtieth year. The smoking interlude was over. Lord Oakburn had enjoyed his pipe, and Miss Lethwait had obligingly kept the door against intruders.

Was Miss Lethwait laying herself out to entrap the unwary? Had she been doing it all along, ever since her entrance into that house? It was a question upon which she never afterwards could come to any satisfactory conclusion. Certainly the tempting bait had been ever before her mind's eye, constantly floating in her brain; but she was of sufficiently honourable nature, and to lay herself out deliberately to allure Lord Oakburn was what she had believed herself hitherto to be wholly incapable of doing. Had she seen another guilty of such conduct, her worst scorn would have been cast to the offender. And yet—was she not, on this night, working for it? It is true she did not lure him on by word or look; but she did stand there knowing that the peer's admiring eyes were bent upon her. She *remained* in that room with him, conscious that she had no business there; feeling that to be there was not honourable towards Lady Jane, who naturally supposed her to be mixing with the company and keeping an eye upon Lucy. She had taken upon herself to indulge him in his longing for his pipe; had filled it for him; had stayed in the fumes of the smoke while he finished it. In after-life Miss Lethwait never quite reconciled that night with her conscience.

"Do you admire all this whirl and hubbub?" suddenly asked the earl.

"No, Lord Oakburn. It dazzles my sight and takes my breath away. But then I am unused to it."

"By Jove! I'd sooner be in a hurricane, rounding Cape Horn. I told Jane it would take us out of our soundings to have this crowd here, but she kept bothering about the 'claims of society.' I'm sure society may be smothered for all the claim it has upon me!"

"The pleasantest society is that of our own fireside—those of us who have firesides to enjoy," returned Miss Lethwait.

"We have all as much as that, I suppose," said the earl.

"Ah, no, Lord Oakburn! Not all. It is not my fortune to have one; and perhaps never will be. But I must not be envious of those who have."

She stood under the gas chandelier, beneath its glittering drops; her head was raised to its own lofty height, but the eyelids drooped until the dark lashes rested on the cheeks—lashes that were moist with tears. She held a sprig of geranium in her white gloves, and her fingers were busy, slowly pulling it to pieces, leaf by leaf, petal from petal.

"And why should you not have a fireside?" bluntly asked Lord Oakburn, his sight not losing a single tear, a single movement of the fingers. Keen sight it was, peering from beneath its bushy brows.

She quite laughed in answer; a scornful laugh, telling of inward pain.

"You may as well ask, my lord, why one woman is Queen of England, and another the unhappy wretch who sits stitching her fifteen hours daily in a garret, wearing out her heart and her life. Our destinies are unequally marked out in this world, and we must take them as they are sent to us. Sometimes a feeling comes over me—I don't know whether it be a wrong one—that the harder the lot in this world, the brighter it will be in that which has to come."

"Favours and fortune are dealt out unequally, that's true enough," said the earl, thinking of his past life of poverty and struggle.

"They are, they are," she answered bitterly. "And the worst is, you are so chained down to your lot that you cannot escape from it. As a poor bird entrapped into a cage, beats its wings against the wires, and beats in vain, so we wear out our minds with our never-ending struggle to free ourselves from the thraldom that destiny has forced upon us. I was not made to live out my life in servitude: every hour of the day I feel this. I feel that my mind, my heart, my intellect, were formed for a higher destiny: nevertheless it is the lot that is appointed me, and I must abide by it."

"Will you share my lot?" suddenly asked the earl.

The governess raised her eyes to his, a keen, searching glance darting from them, as if she suspected the words were only a mockery. The peer moved nearer, and laid his hand upon her shoulder.

"I am a blue jacket of nine and fifty years, Miss Lethwait, but I have some wear in me yet. I never had an earthly thing the matter with me except gout; and if you'll be Countess of Oakburn and make my fireside yours, I'll take care of you."

It was rather an odd way of making an offer, certainly; gout and marriage, jumbled incongruously together. The earl, however, was not a courtier: he could only speak the genuine thoughts of his heart.

"What do you say?" he continued, having given her scarcely time to speak.

She gently removed his hand from her shoulder, and lifted her wet eyes to his. The tears were genuine as the earl's words: emotion—perhaps gratitude—had called them up.

"Thank you greatly, Lord Oakburn, but it could not be."

"Why not?" asked the earl.

"It—I—it would never be agreeable to your daughters, my lord. They would never tolerate me as your wife."

"What are you talking about now?" cried the offended earl,

who never brooked opposition, no matter from whom. "My daughters! What have they to do with it? I am not their husband . they'll be getting husbands of their own."

"I am young; younger than Lady Jane," she said, her lips growing pale with the conflict that was before her. "Lord Oakburn, if you made me your wife it might sow dissension between you and all your daughters, especially between you and Lady Jane. I feel, I feel that it would do so."

"By Jupiter! but my girls shall not thwart me!" cried the peer in a heat. "I should like to see them trying it. Laura has chosen for herself, Clarice has gone roaming nobody knows where, Lucy is a child; and as for Jane, do you think she possesses no common sense?"

The governess made no reply. She seemed to be endeavouring to steady her trembling lips.

"Look you, Miss Lethwait. The very day I came into the title, I made up my mind to marry: it is incumbent on me to do so. The next heir is a remote fellow, hardly a cousin at all, and he has lived in Nova Scotia or some such outlandish place since he was a boy. A pretty thing it would be to have that figure-head to succeed me! Any one with a grain of gumption in his topsails would have known that I should marry; and, my dear, you've a splendid figure, and I needn't look further, and I like you, and that's enough. Will you be Lady Oakburn?"

Miss Lethwait shook excessively, all of emotion that she possessed within her was called up. She had really good and amiable qualities, and she did *not* like to be the means of sowing ill-feeling between the earl and his children. In that same moment the past grew clear to her, and she was conscious that the possibility of becoming Countess of Oakburn had been suspended before her dazzled vision as the one tempting bait of life. How few, how few have the strength to resist such baits! Do you remember where the Abbot of Glastonbury, walking out in the summer's noon, overtakes the Red Fisherman plying his trade, and halts to watch him?

> There was turning of keys and creaking of locks
> As he drew forth a bait from his iron box.
> It was a bundle of beautiful things;
> A peacock's tail and a butterfly's wings,
> A scarlet slipper, an auburn curl,
> An armlet of silk, and a bracelet of pearl;
> And a packet of letters from whose sweet fold
> Such a stream of delicate odours rolled,
> That the abbot fell on his face, and fainted,
> And deemed his spirit was half-way sainted.

For beautiful trifles such as these, woman has before now given up her soul: how much more, then, her hand and heart! Not one

but bore charms for the eyes of Miss Lethwait; symbols all of them—the scarlet slipper, the curl, the silk armlet, the bracelet—of that path and pleasure that must beset the future partner of Lord Oakburn's coronet. These things in prospective wear so plausible a magic! The packet of letters, sickly with their perfume, would hold out to Miss Lethwait the least attraction; love-letters penned by the old peer could savour of little except the ridiculous.

Would the tempting bait win her? Hear what success followed that, thrown by the Red Fisherman.

> One jerk, and there a lady lay,
> A lady wondrous fair:
> But the rose of her lip had all faded away,
> And her cheek it was white and cold as clay,
> And torn was her raven hair.
> "Ha! ha!" said the fisher in merry guise,
> "Her gallant was hook'd before!"
> And the abbot heaved some piteous sighs,
> For oft had he bless'd those deep-blue eyes;
> The eyes of Mistress Shore.

The loving and the lovely, the pure and the sullied, the guilty and the innocent, all have succumbed to the golden visions held out to them. Had Miss Lethwait withstood, she had been more than woman. Lord Oakburn waited for her answer patiently—patiently for him.

"If you wish to make me yours, my lord, so be it," she said, and her very lips quivered as she yielded to the temptation. "I will strive to be to you a good and faithful wife."

"Then that's settled," said the matter-of-fact earl, with more straightforwardness than gallantry. But he laid his hand upon her shoulder again, and bent to take a kiss from her lips.

At that moment one stood in the doorway, her haughty eyelids raised in astonishment, her blood bubbling up in fiery indignation. It was Lady Jane Chesney. She had come in search of the governess in consequence of the communication made by Lucy. That any serious intention accompanied that kiss, Jane suspected not. Never for a moment had it glanced across Jane's mind that her father would marry again. In her devotion, her all-absorbing love, there had existed not a crevice for any such idea to intrude itself. She gazed; but she only believed him to have been betrayed into a ridiculous bit of folly, not excusable even in a young man, considering Miss Lethwait's position in the family; worse than inexcusable in Lord Oakburn. And the governess, lingering in the room with him, standing passively to receive the kiss! No pen could express the amount of scornful condemnation cast on her from that moment by Jane Chesney.

Too pure-minded, too lofty-natured, too much the gentlewoman

to surprise them, Jane drew back noiselessly, but some movement in the velvet curtain had attracted the notice of the earl. The door to this room was a sliding panel—which Miss Lethwait had opened when the pipe was finished—with looped-up inner portières of crimson.

The curtain stirred, and Lord Oakburn, probably thinking he had been hidden long enough away from his guests, and that it might be as well to show himself again, if he wished to observe a decent hospitality, went forth. Jane waited an instant, and entered. The governess was sitting then, her hands clasped before her, as one who is in deep thought or pain, her eyes strained on vacancy, a burning spot on her cheeks, scarlet as the geranium wreath in her black hair.

"Are you *here*, Miss Lethwait? I have been searching for you everywhere. Allow me to request that you pay proper attention to Lady Lucy."

She spoke in a ringing tone of command, one never yet heard by the governess from the quiet Jane Chesney. Miss Lethwait bowed her head as she quitted the room in obedience to see after Lucy, and the scarlet of emotion on her face was turning to pallor.

Jane watched her out. She was not one to make a scene, but she had to compress her lips together, lest they should open in defiance of her will. Her mind was outraged by what she had witnessed; the very house was outraged; and she determined that on the morrow Miss Lethwait should leave. In her fond prejudice she cast little blame on her father; it all went to the share of the unlucky governess. Jane believed—and it cannot be denied that circumstances appeared to justify the belief—that Miss Lethwait had sought Lord Oakburn in that room, and hidden herself there with him on purpose to play off upon him her wiles and fascinations.

"Never more shall she have the opportunity," murmured Jane, "never more, never more. Ere midday to-morrow the house shall be rid of her."

Jane mixed again with the crowd, but so completely vexed was she by what had occurred that she remained silent and passive, not paying the smallest fraction of attention to her guests. As she stood near one of the windows of the drawing-room, certain words, spoken in her vicinity, at length forced themselves on her notice: words that awoke her with a start to the reality of the present.

"Her name's Beauchamp. My mother wrote to one of the governess-agencies over here, I believe, and they sent her out to us in Canada."

Jane turned to look at the speaker. He was a stranger, a very young man, brought that evening to the house by some friends, and introduced by them. His name, Vaughan, had not struck upon

any chord of Jane's memory at the time; but it did so now in connection with the name of Beauchamp. Could he indeed be a member of that family in Canada to whom the Miss Beauchamp had gone out?"

"And she is an efficient governess?" continued one of the voices. It was a lady speaking now.

"Very much so, indeed," replied Mr. Vaughan. "I have heard my mother say she does not know what she should do without Miss Beauchamp."

All her pulses throbbing with expectant hope, Jane moved up, and laid her finger on Mr. Vaughan's arm.

"Are you from Canada?"

"From Lower Canada," he replied, struck with the suppressed eagerness of her tone. "My father, Colonel Vaughan, was ordered there some years ago with his regiment, and he took his family with him. Liking the place, we have remained there, and——"

"You live near to Montreal?" interrupted Jane, too anxious to allow him to continue.

"We live at Montreal."

"I heard you speak of a Miss Beauchamp: a governess, if I understood you rightly?"

"Yes, I was speaking of Miss Beauchamp. She is my sisters' governess. She came out to us from England."

"How long ago?"

"How long ago?—let me see," he deliberated. "I don't think she has been with us much more than a twelvemonth yet."

It was surely the same. Jane without ceremony placed her arm within the young man's, and led him to a less-crowded room.

"I am interested in a Miss Beauchamp, Mr. Vaughan," she said, as they paced it together. "A lady of that name, whom I know, went abroad as governess about a year ago. At least, we suppose she went abroad, though we don't know with certainty where. I am very anxious to find her. I think the Miss Beauchamp you speak of may be the same."

"I shouldn't wonder," returned the young gentleman. "This one's uncommonly nice-looking, Lady Jane."

"So was she. I should tell you that we have been making inquiries, and had learnt that a Miss Beauchamp went to Montreal about twelve months ago. That lady no doubt is the one in your house; it may be the one we are wishing to find. We have already sent out letters to ascertain, and are expecting their answers every day. How long have you been in England?"

"Not a fortnight yet. I asked Miss Beauchamp if I could call on any of her friends in England with news of her; but she said she had none that she cared to send to."

"It can be no other than Clarice!" murmured Jane in her inmost heart. "I am sure it must be the same," she said aloud. "Can you describe her to me, Mr. Vaughan?"

"I can almost show her to you if I can catch sight of a young lady I was dancing with just now," he replied. "I kept thinking how much she resembled Miss Beauchamp."

"A pretty little girl in a white crape frock and with a white wreath in her hair," said Jane, eagerly, remembering how great a resemblance Lucy bore to Clarice.

"I—no, I don't think she wore a wreath," returned Mr. Vaughan. "And she was not little. She—there she is! there she is!" he broke off in quick excitement. "That's the one; the lady in the blue dress, with some gold stuff in her hair. You can't think how much she is like Miss Beauchamp."

Jane's spirit turned faint. It was another disappointment. The young lady he pointed to was a Miss Munro, a very tall girl, with a remarkably fair complexion and light-blue eyes. No imagination, however suggestive, could have traced the slightest resemblance between that young lady and Clarice Chesney.

"*She!*" exclaimed Jane. "Has Miss Beauchamp—your Miss Beauchamp—a complexion as light as that? Has she blue eyes?"

"Yes. Miss Beauchamp is one of the fairest girls I ever saw. Her hair is flaxen, very silky-looking, and she wears it in curls. It's just like the hair you see upon fair-complexioned dolls."

"It is not the same," said Jane, battling with her disappointment as she best might. "The Miss Beauchamp I speak of has large soft brown eyes and brown hair. She is about as tall as I am."

"Then that sets the question at rest, Lady Jane," returned the young man, alluding to the eyes and hair. "And our Miss Beauchamp is very tall. As tall as that lady standing there."

He pointed to Miss Lethwait. Jane withdrew her eyes in aversion, and they fell on Lucy. She made a sign to the child, and Lucy ran up, her brown eyes sparkling, her dark hair flowing, the bright rose shining in her damask cheeks.

"There is a resemblance in this young lady's face to the one I have been speaking of, Mr. Vaughan. The eyes and hair and complexion are just alike."

"Is there? Why that's—somebody told me that was little Lady Lucy Chesney—your sister, of course, Lady Jane. She's very pretty, but she's not a bit like Miss Beauchamp."

Was it to be ever so? Should they appear to come on the very track of Clarice, only to find their hopes a delusion? Things seemed to be going all the wrong way to-night with Jane Chesney.

CHAPTER XXXI.

TURNED AWAY.

LADY JANE CHESNEY sat in the small drawing-room. It was almost the only room that the servants had put into habitable order since the revelry of the previous night. Possibly Miss Lethwait may have deemed that to be the reason why her breakfast was that morning served apart. In the simple household, the governess had hitherto taken her meals with the family; but Jane would not again sit down to the same board with one who had so forgotten herself. Lucy, by Jane's orders, was allowed to remain later than usual in bed.

Lord Oakburn had taken his breakfast with Jane in this same small drawing-room. Everything in the house seemed at sixes and sevens, and he made no remark upon the absence of the governess and Lucy. His lordship was expending all his superfluous breath in a tirade against party-giving.

"Where's the use of it, after all?" he asked of Jane. "What end does it answer? Here we have the house turned topsy-turvy just for the sake of two or three hours' crush! There's no sense in it, Jane. What good does it do? The folks have the trouble of dressing themselves, and they come out for an hour, and then go back and undress?—wishing themselves quietly at home all the while. We shall be two days getting straight again. The thing's just this, Jane: it may be all very well for people who keep a full set of servants in each department to enter on the folly, but it's an awful bother for those who don't. Catch me giving one next year! If you must give it on your own score, my Lady Jane, I shall go out the while."

Did the thought cross the earl's mind as he spoke, that ere the next year should dawn, Lady Jane would no longer be his house's mistress? Most probably: for he suddenly ceased his grumbling, drank his tea, and quitted the room, Jane vainly reminding him that he had made less breakfast than usual.

She had the things taken away, and she took out her housekeeping book—for Jane was an exact account-keeper still—and made out what was due to Miss Lethwait. She had not yet been with them three months, but Jane would pay her as though she had been. Ringing the bell, Pompey came in to answer it.

"Desire Miss Lethwait to step here," said Jane.

Miss Lethwait came in at once. It was an idle hour with her, Lucy being yet in her room. She was dressed rather more than usual, in a handsome gown that she generally wore to church on a

Sunday: a sort of fancy material with rich colours in it. Had she put it on in consequence of her new position in relation to Lord Oakburn?—to look well in his eyes? There was little doubt of it. All night long she had lain awake: her brain, her mind, her thoughts in a tumult; the hot blood coursing fiercely through her veins at the glories that awaited her. One moment these glories seemed very near; real, tangible, *certain;* the next, they faded into darkness, and she said to herself that probably Lord Oakburn had only spoken in the passing moment's delusion: a delusion which would fade away with the return of morning.

The torment, the uncertainty did not cease with the day, and it brought a rich colour to her pale face, rarely seen there; never except in moments of deep emotion. As she entered Lady Jane's presence with this bloom on her cheeks and the pure light shining upon her magnificent hair, her handsome gown rustling behind her and her fine figure drawn up to its full height, even Jane, with all her prejudice, was struck with her real grandeur.

It did not soften Jane in the least; nay, it had the opposite effect. How haughty Jane could be when she chose, this moment proved. She was sitting herself, but she did not invite the governess to sit: she pointed imperiously with her hand for her to stand, there, on the other side the table, as she might have pointed to a servant. In her condemnation of wrong-doing, Jane Chesney did not deem the governess worthy of sitting in her presence.

"Miss Lethwait, I find it inexpedient to retain you in my household," began Jane in a coldly civil tone. "It will not inconvenience you, I hope, to leave to-day."

To say that Miss Lethwait gazed at Lady Jane in consternation, would be saying little. Never for a moment had she feared her to have been in any way cognizant of the previous night's little episode in the smoking-room; she had only supposed this present summons had reference to some matter or other connected with Lucy. The words fell upon her as a shock, and she could only stand in astonishment.

"I beg your pardon, Lady Jane," she said, when she found her tongue. "*Leave*, did you say? Leave to-day!"

"You will oblige me by doing so," calmly replied Jane.

Miss Lethwait stood before Lady Jane in silence. That calmness is so difficult to stand against! She might have met it better had her ladyship only been in a passion.

"May I ask the reason for this sudden dismissal?" she at length murmured, with a rush of fear that Lady Jane must have been in some obscure corner of the smoking-room and witnessed the kiss.

"I would prefer that you did not ask me the reason," replied Jane. "Possibly you might find it in your own conscience if you

searched for it. There are things which to the refined mind are derogatory even to think of, utterly obnoxious to speak about. I had deemed you a gentlewoman, Miss Lethwait. I am grieved that I was mistaken: and I bitterly regret having placed you in charge of Lady Lucy Chesney."

All that Miss Lethwait possessed of anger rose up to boiling heat. Lady Jane's tone was so stinging, so quietly contemptuous: as if she, the governess, were no longer worthy of any other. The taunt as to the gentlewoman told home.

Retorting words rose to her tongue; but ere the lips gave utterance to them, prudence came to her, and they were choked down. A scene now with Lady Jane, and she might never be Countess of Oakburn. The scarlet hue of emotion tinged her cheek, deep and glowing, as it had on the previous night; but she compelled herself to endure, and stood in silence.

"There is due to you a balance of six pounds," resumed Jane; "and five pounds in lieu of the customary month's warning will make it eleven. In justice I believe I ought also to advance to you money for a month's board expenses: if you will name any sum you may deem suitable, I——"

"I beg your pardon, *that* is not customary," passionately interrupted Miss Lethwait. "I could not accept anything of the kind."

"Then I believe you will find this correct," said Jane, placing a ten-pound note and a sovereign on the table. And Miss Lethwait after a moment's hesitation took them up.

"I am sorry to have incurred your displeasure, Lady Jane," she said, her anger subsiding. "Perhaps you will think better of me sometime."

The tone, in spite of herself, was one of deprecation. It grated on Jane Chesney's ear. She raised her haughty eyelids, and bent on the governess one long look of condemnation.

"Never," she answered, with more temper than she had hitherto shown. "Your duties in this house are ended, Miss Lethwait. Any assistance that you may require in packing, I beg you will ring for. And I would prefer—I would very much prefer, that you should not see Lady Lucy before your departure."

"Sent out of the house like a dog!" murmured the unlucky governess to her own rebellious spirit. "But the tables may be turned; yes, they may be turned ere many months have gone by!"

Jane moved her hand and bowed her from her presence, coldly civil, grandly courteous. She vouchsafed no other leave-taking, and the governess went forth from her presence, her cheeks hot and scarlet. Not many times in her life had that scarlet dyed the face of Eliza Lethwait.

Outside the door she paused in indecision. In spite of all that

had passed, she was not deficient in maidenly reticence, and to search out Lord Oakburn went against her. But it was necessary he should know of this dismissal, if the past night's offer were to be regarded as an earnest one.

She went swiftly down the stairs and found the earl in the small apartment that Lucy had called his smoking-room. He would go there sometimes in a morning if he had letters to write. The earl was seated, leaning over an open letter, his stick lying on the table beside it. He looked up when she entered.

"Lady Jane has dismissed me, Lord Oakburn."

She spoke in no complaining tone, in no voice of anger. Rather in sadness, as if she had merited the dismissal. The earl did not take in the sense of the words; he had been buried in a reverie, and it seemed that he could not at once awake from it.

"What?" cried he.

"I am sorry to say that Lady Jane has dismissed me," she repeated.

"What's that for?" he demanded, awaking fully to the words now, and his voice and his stick were alike raised.

"Lady Jane did not explain. She called me in, told me I could not remain, and that she wished me to depart at once. I could not leave the house without telling you, Lord Oakburn, and—and—if you please—giving you my address. I shall go to my father's."

"Shiver my timbers if you shall go out of my house in this way!" stormed the earl, striking his stick on the table. "My Lady Jane's a cool hand when she chooses, I know; but you have a right to proper warning."

Miss Lethwait extended her hand, and exhibited the money in its palm.

"Lady Jane has not forgotten to give me the warning's substitute," she said, with a proud, bitter smile.

"Then, hark you, my dear! I am the house's master, and I'll let my lady know that I am. You shall not——"

"Stay, Lord Oakburn—I beg your pardon," she interrupted. "I could not remain in the house in defiance of Lady Jane. You have not thought, perhaps, how impossible it would be for one in my subordinate capacity to enter the lists of opposition against her. Indeed it could not be."

Lord Oakburn growled. But he made no answer. Possibly the sense of the argument was forcing itself upon him.

"You belong to me, now," he presently said. "I won't have you turned out like this."

"I shall be happier at home," she resumed. "In any case, I must have left shortly, if—if—I mean," she broke off, stammering and hesitating, for she did not like openly to allude to her new prospects

until they were more assured—"I must have left your roof before——"

"Before you re-enter it as my wife," interposed the earl, calming down. "Be it so. I don't know but you are right. And when you do enter it, it will be your turn, you know, to lord it over my Lady Jane."

Miss Lethwait felt that Lady Jane was not one to allow her or anybody else to "lord" it over her; and a dark shade seemed to rise up in her mind and shadow forth a troubled future. A question from Lord Oakburn interrupted the vision.

"When shall you be ready?"

"In an hour's time," she answered. "I have not much luggage to put up."

"Not for leaving here," cried the earl, correcting her mistake somewhat hotly. "When shall you be ready for the splicing?"

"The splicing?" she faltered.

"For the marriage. Don't you understand? In a week?"

"Oh, Lord Oakburn! Putting other and weightier considerations aside, I could not be ready in a week."

"What are the weighty considerations?"

"The—the seemliness—the fitness of things," she answered, growing rather nervous. "My preparations would take me some weeks, Lord Oakburn."

"Preparations take some weeks!" echoed the earl, opening his eyes in astonishment. "What, for a wedding? I never heard of such a thing. Why, I could fit out my sea-chest in a day for a three-years' cruise! What d'ye mean, Miss Lethwait?"

Miss Lethwait did not feel equal to disputing the outfitting point with him. All that could be settled later. She gave him her father's address at his country vicarage, Twifford; and Lord Oakburn told her he should be at it almost as soon as she was.

"Then, now that I have told you, I will hasten my departure," she said, drawing aside the velvet curtain for her exit. "Lady Jane will not be pleased if I linger. Fare you well, Lord Oakburn."

"Yes, I suppose it's better that you should go," acquiesced the earl. "I don't mean to tell her, you see, until it's all over. Just come here, my dear."

She went up to him. She supposed he had something particular to say to her; some direction to tender.

"Just give me a kiss."

The gallant peer had not risen, and she would have to stoop to his up-turned face. It was certainly reversing the general order of such things. For a single moment her whole spirit rose up in rebellion; the next, she had bent her face passively to his.

With his single kiss upon her lips, with the red blood dyeing her

brow, with a choking sob of emotion, she went from his presence and ascended to her chamber. Lucy ran out from the adjoining one ere she could enter it. The child, who had grown fond of her governess in spite of the dreadful German exercises, threw her arms round her.

"Oh, was it not a charming party! I wish we could have one every night! And how good you are, Miss Lethwait, to give me holiday to-day. What are you going to do?"

"Lucy, dear, the holiday is not of my giving. I am going from you. I am not to teach you any longer. I shall have departed in an hour's time."

"What's that for?" exclaimed Lucy in very astonishment.

And then, and not until then, did it recur to Miss Lethwait's remembrance that Lady Jane had desired her not to see Lucy before she left. The request had brought its sting to Miss Lethwait: had her ladyship feared she would contaminate the child?—but she had never meant to disobey it. There was no help for it now.

"Are you not going to be my governess any longer?" questioned Lucy.

"I am sorry to have mentioned this, Lucy," she murmured in contrition. "I ought not to have spoken to you. Will you kindly tell Lady Jane that I spoke in inadvertence, not intentionally; and that I am sorry to have done so?"

"But, Miss Lethwait——"

"But I cannot tell you anything," was the interruption of the governess. "It may chance, my dear, that we shall meet again at some future time. I am not sure. What seems certain one day vanishes the next. But you may believe one thing, Lucy—that I shall always love you."

She put the pretty arms away from her, and bolted herself into her chamber. Lucy flew to the breakfast-room. It was in the hands of the servants: it had been the supper-room of the previous night.

"Where's Lady Jane?" asked the child, surveying the *débris* before her with interest.

The servants did not know, unless her ladyship was in the small drawing-room, and Lucy went to the small drawing-room in search of her.

Jane was there. She had been shut in there quietly with her housekeeping book since the dismissal of the governess; but she had risen now to go to Lord Oakburn.

"Oh, Jane! Is Miss Lethwait really going?"

"Yes," calmly replied Jane.

"Why? I am so sorry."

"Hush, Lucy."

"But you'll tell me why, Jane? What has she done?"

"You must not ask, my dear. These things do not concern you. I will take your lessons myself until I can find some one to fill Miss Lethwait's place, more suitable than she is."

"But Jane——"

"I cannot tell you anything more, Lucy," was the peremptory answer. "It is enough for you to know that Miss Lethwait is discharged, and that she quits the house to-day. I am very sorry that she ever entered it."

Leaving the little girl standing there, Jane went down to Lord Oakburn. He was seated in just the same position as when interrupted by Miss Lethwait: himself in a reverie, and the open letter before him.

Jane drew the velvet curtain close, and told him she had been discharging the governess. She found that she was unsuitable for her charge, was all the explanation she gave. Jane had taken her knitting in her hand, and she sat with her eyes bent upon it while she spoke; never raising them; saying as little as she possibly could say. It was terribly unpleasant to Jane to mention that name to her father, after what she had seen in that very room on the previous night.

The earl made no interruption. It may be, that Jane had feared she knew not what of question and objection; but he heard her in silence. He never said a word until she had finished, and then not much.

"It was rather cool of you to dismiss her without warning, my lady. Harsh measures."

A rosy flush tinged Jane's delicate features. "I think not, papa."

"As you please," returned the earl. "And now what's to be done about Clarice?"

The question took her by surprise. Lord Oakburn pointed to the open letter.

"I got this letter this morning, Jane. We have been mistaken in supposing that it was Clarice who went to Canada. It was another Miss Beauchamp."

"Oh yes, papa, I know it," returned Jane in much distress, as she reverted to the disappointment imparted by Mr. Vaughan. "I begin—I begin to despair of finding her."

"Then you are a simpleton for your pains," retorted the earl. "Despair of finding her! What next? She has gone on the Continent with some family, and is put down in their passport as 'the governess;' that's what it is. Despair of finding her, indeed! I shall go off to that governess-agency, and ask what they meant by leading us to believe that it was the same Miss Beauchamp."

In his hot haste, his impulsive temper, the earl rose and departed there and then, hurling no end of anathemas at the unlucky

Pompey, who could not at the first moment, in the general disarrangement, lay his hands on his master's hat. And ere the sun was high at noon, the governess had quitted the house, *as* governess, for ever.

CHAPTER XXXII.

AS IRON ENTERING INTO THE SOUL.

THE Earl of Oakburn was in a bustle. The earl was one of those people who always are in a bustle when starting upon a journey, be it ever so short a one. He was going on a visit to Sir James Marden at Chesney Oaks, and he was putting himself into commotion over it.

To Jane's surprise he had announced an intention not to take Pompey. Jane wondered how he would get on without that faithful and brow beaten follower, if only in the light of an object to roar at; and when she asked the earl his reason for not taking him, he had civilly replied that it was no business of hers. Jane felt sorry for the decision, for she believed Pompey to be essential to her father's comforts; and she knew the earl, with all his temper, liked the old servant, and was glad to have him about him; but otherwise Jane attached no importance to the matter. So the earl was driven to Paddington, and Pompey, after seeing his master and his carpet-bag safely in an express train, returned with the carriage to Portland Place.

Jane Chesney was a little busy on her own score just now, for she was seeking a governess to replace Miss Lethwait; one who should prove to be a more desirable inmate than that lady had been. Jane blamed herself greatly for not having inquired more minutely into Miss Lethwait's antecedents. She had been, as she thought now, too much prepossessed in her favour at first sight, had taken her too entirely upon trust. That Jane would not err again on that score, her present occupation was proving—that of searching out the smallest details in connection with the lady now recommended to her, a Miss Snow. Not many days yet had Miss Lethwait quitted the house, but Jane had forcibly put her out of remembrance. Never, willingly, would she think again upon one, whose conduct in that one particular, the episode to which Jane had been a witness the night of the party, had been so entirely unseemly.

Lord Oakburn was whirled along that desirable line for travellers, the Great Western. In the opposite corner of the comfortable carriage there happened to be another old naval commander sitting,

and the terms that the two got upon were so good, that his lordship could not believe his eyes when he saw the well-known station at Pembury, or believe that they had already reached it.

He had, however, to part with his new acquaintance, for Pembury station was his alighting point. He found Sir James Marden's carriage waiting for him, a sort of mail phaeton, Sir James himself, a little man with a yellow face, seated on the box-seat. The earl and his carpet-bag were duly installed in it, and Sir James drove out of the station.

As they were proceeding up the street to take the avenue for Chesney Oaks,—the pleasant avenue, less green now than it had been in spring, which wound through the park to the house,—a small carriage, drawn by a pair of beautiful ponies, came rapidly down upon them. Not more beautiful in their way, those ponies, than were the ladies seated in the carriage. Two gay, lovely ladies, laughing and talking with each other, their veils and their streamers and their other furbelows, flying behind them in the wind. The one, driving, was Colonel Marden's wife, and she was about to rein in and greet Sir James, when her companion, with a half-smothered cry and a sudden paleness displacing the rich bloom on her cheeks, seized the reins and sent the ponies onward at a gallop. It was Lady Laura Carlton.

"Holloa!" exclaimed Sir James, "what was that for?"

Lord Oakburn, in his surprise, had started up in the phaeton. About the last person he had been thinking of was Laura, and Pembury was about the last place he would have expected to see her in. The fact was, Laura had recently met Mrs. Marden at a friend's house near Great Wennock; the two ladies had struck up a sudden friendship, and Laura had come back with her for a few days' visit.

"She was evidently scared at the sight of one of us, and I'm sure I never met her before to my knowledge," cried Sir James, alluding to the lady seated with Mrs. Marden. "Do you know her, Lord Oakburn?"

"Know her!" repeated the earl rather explosively. "I'm sorry to say I do know her, sir. She is an ungrateful daughter of mine, who ran away from home to be married to a fellow, and never asked my leave."

"It must be Lady Laura Carlton!" quickly exclaimed Sir James Marden.

"It is," said the earl. "And I assure you I'd give a great deal out of my pocket if she were Lady Laura Anybody-else."

"You'll have to forgive her, I suppose. What a handsome girl she is!"

"No, I shan't have to forgive her," returned the earl, much offended at the suggestion. "I don't intend to forgive her."

Brave words, no doubt. But who knows what would have come of the interview had that pony-carriage been allowed to stop? It might have been a turning-point in Laura's life, might have led to a reconciliation—for Lord Oakburn's bark was worse than his bite, and he loved his children. But Laura Carlton, in her startled fear at seeing him so close to her, had herself given the check and the impetus, and the opportunity was gone for ever.

"What brings her at Pembury?" growled the earl, as they drove through the park.

"I can't tell," replied Sir James. "I conclude she must be visiting at my brother's."

"I didn't know she was acquainted with them," was the earl's comment. "Forgive a clandestine marriage! No, never!"

Brave words again of Lord Oakburn's! Clandestine marriages are not good in themselves, and they often work incalculable evil, entailing embarrassing consequences on more than one generation. But the condemnation would have come with better grace from another than Lord Oakburn, seeing that he was contemplating something of the sort on his own account.

He slept one night at Chesney Oaks, and then concluded his visit. Sir James Marden was surprised and vexed at the abrupt termination. He set it down to the unwelcome presence of the earl's rebellious daughter at Pembury, and pressed Lord Oakburn's hand at parting, and begged him to come again shortly, at a more convenient season.

But most likely Lord Oakburn had never intended a longer stay. The probabilities were—it's hard, you know, to have to write it of a middle-aged earl, a member of the sedate and honourable Upper House—that he had only taken Chesney Oaks as a blind to his daughters on his way to Miss Lethwait. For his real visit was to her.

Chesney Oaks was situated in quite an opposite part of the kingdom to Twifford Vicarage, but by taking advantage of cross lines, Lord Oakburn contrived to reach Twifford late that same night. He did not intrude on them until the following morning. The house, a low one, covered with ivy, was small and unpretending, but exceedingly picturesque; its garden was beautiful, and the birds made their nests and sang in the clustering trees that surrounded the lawn and flowers.

In features they were very much alike, but in figure no two could be much more dissimilar than the father and daughter. The Vicar was a little shrunken man, particularly timid in manner; his daughter magnificent as a queen. If she had looked queenly in the handsomely proportioned rooms of the earl's town house, how much more did she appear so in the miniature little parlour of the Vicarage.

Lord Oakburn entered upon his business in his usual blunt fashion. He had come down, he said, to make acquaintance with Mr. Lethwait, and to know when the wedding was to be.

The Vicar replied by stating that Eliza had told him all. And he, the father, was deeply sensible of the honour done her by the Earl of Oakburn, and that he himself should be proud and pleased to see her his wife; but that he felt scruples upon the point, as did Eliza. He felt that her entrance into the family might be very objectionable to the earl's daughters.

And, knowing what you do know of the earl, you may be sure that that speech was the signal for an outburst. He poured forth a torrent of angry eloquence in his peculiar manner, so completely annihilating every argument but his own, that the timid clergyman never dared to utter another word of objection. The earl must have it his own way: as it had been pretty sure from the first he would have it.

"Eliza has been a good and dutiful daughter, my lord," said the Vicar, who in his retired life, his humble home, had hardly ever been brought into contact with one of the earl's social degree. "My living has been very small, and my expenses have been inevitably large—that is, large for one in my position. The last years of my wife's life were years of illness; she suffered from a complaint that required constant medical attendance and expensive nourishment, and Eliza was to us throughout almost as a guardian angel. Every penny she could spare from her own absolute expenses, she sent to us. She has put up with undesirable places, where discomforts were great, the insults hard to be borne, and would not throw herself out, lest we might suffer. She has been a *good* daughter," he emphatically added; "she will, I hesitate not to say it, make a good wife. And if only your lordship's daughters will——"

Another interrupting burst from his lordship: his daughters had nothing to do with it, and he did not intend that they should have. And the Vicar was finally silenced.

The earl did things like nobody else. He had spent the best part of his life at sea, and shore ideas and proprieties were still almost to him as a closed book. In discussing the arrangements of the marriage with Miss Lethwait—for he compelled her to discuss them, and he did it in a perfectly matter-of-fact manner, just as he might have discussed a debate in the Lords—she found herself obliged to hint, as he did not, that a tour, long or short, inland or foreign, as might be agreeable, was usually deemed necessary on that auspicious occasion. The earl could not be brought to see it; did not understand it. What on earth was the matter with his house at home that they could not proceed direct to it on their wedding-day? he demanded. Were there a brig at hand they might enjoy a month's

cruise in her, and he'd say something to it, or even a well-built yacht; but he hated land travelling, and was not going to encounter it.

Miss Lethwait thought of the horrors of sea-sickness, and left the brig and the yacht to drop into abeyance. Neither dared she, in the timidity of her new position, urge the tour further upon him; but she did shrink from being taken home to the midst of his daughters on the marriage day.

On the following day the earl went back to town, Miss Lethwait having succeeded in postponing the period of their marriage until October.

September was a busy month with Jane Chesney. The term for which they had engaged their present furnished residence was expiring, and Lord Oakburn took on lease one of the neighbouring houses in Portland Place.

Jane was in her element. Choosing furniture and planning out arrangements for their new home was welcome work, all being done with one primary object—the comfort of her father. The best rooms were appropriated to him, the best things were placed in them. Jane thought how happy they should be together, she and her father, in this settled homestead. They did not intend to go out of town that year: why should they? they had only a few months ago entered it. Custom? Fashion? The earl did not understand custom, and fashion was a foreign vessel to him. Jane only cared for what he cared.

They moved into the house the last week in September, Jane anxious with loving thoughts still. But for the mysterious and prolonged absence of Clarice, she would have been thoroughly and completely happy. Miss Snow was proving an efficient governess for Lucy, and Jane had leisure on her hands. The unpleasant episode in the reign of the last governess, Eliza Lethwait, had nearly faded from Jane Chesney's memory. She no more dreamt of connecting that condemned lady with certain occasional short absences of the earl in the country, than she dreamt of attributing them to visits paid to the Great Mogul.

The first week in October came in, and the evenings were growing wintry. Lord Oakburn had been away from home three days, and Jane, who had just got the house into nice condition, and was resting from her labours, had leisure to feel ill. Not actually ill, perhaps; but anything but well. She had felt so all day; a sick shivery feeling that she could not account for; a depressed sensation, as of some approaching evil. Do coming events thus cast their shadows before? There are those who tell us that they do so. Not in that way, however, was Jane Chesney superstitious, nor did she think of attributing her sensations to any such mystical cause.

She felt "out of sorts," she said to Lucy's governess, and supposed she had caught cold.

Causing a fire to be lighted in her dressing-room, a little snuggery on the second floor adjoining her bedroom, she resolved to make herself comfortable there for the evening. She ordered the tea-tray to be brought up, and sent a message for Miss Snow and Lucy.

Miss Snow, a little, lively, warm-mannered woman, the very reverse of the dignified Miss Lethwait, was full of trifling cares for Lady Jane. She threw a warm shawl on her shoulders, she insisted on wrapping her feet in flannel as they rested on the footstool before the fire, and she asked permission to make and pour out the tea.

Judith was at that moment bringing in the tea-tray. Judith—I'm sure I forget whether this has been mentioned before—had taken the place of own maid to Jane and Lucy when the change occurred in their fortunes. Jane valued her greatly, and the girl deserved it.

"A gentleman has called to inquire when the earl will be at home, my lady," she said, as she put down the tray. "He wishes very particularly to see him."

"I'm sure I don't know," said Jane rather listlessly. "Who is it?"

"It is that same gentleman who has been here occasionally on Sir James Marden's business," replied Judith. "I heard him say to Wilson as I came through the hall that he had a communication from Chesney Oaks which he wished the earl to see as soon as possible. Wilson asked me if I would bring the message to your ladyship."

Jane turned her head in some slight surprise. "A communication from Chesney Oaks?" she repeated. "But papa is at Chesney Oaks. You can tell the gentleman so, Judith."

"No, Jane, papa's not at Chesney Oaks," interposed Lucy, who was dancing about the room with her usual restlessness. "If he had been going to Chesney Oaks he would have gone from Paddington, wouldn't he?"

"Well?" said Jane.

"Well, he went to King's Cross."

"How do you know?" asked Jane.

Lucy gave a deprecatory glance at Miss Snow ere she entered on her confession. She had run out to her papa after he was in the carriage for a last kiss, and heard Pompey give the order to the coachman, "King's Cross Station."

Jane shook her head. "You must have been mistaken, Lucy," she said. "I asked papa whether he was going to Chesney Oaks, and he—he——" Jane stopped a moment in recollection—"he nodded his head in the affirmative. It must have meant the affirmative," she added slowly, as if debating the point with herself. "I am sure he is at Chesney Oaks,"

"Shall I inquire of the coachman, my lady?" asked Judith. "He is downstairs."

"Yes, do," replied Jane. "And you can tell the gentleman, Sir James Marden's agent, that I expect Lord Oakburn home daily until I see him. He seldom remains away above three days."

Judith went down on her errand, and came up again. Lucy was right. The coachman had driven his master to King's Cross Station: the coachman further said that it was to King's Cross Station he had driven his master on his recent absences. Jane wondered. She was not aware that Lord Oakburn knew any one on that line. This time he had taken Pompey with him.

Miss Snow busied herself with the tea; Lucy talked; Jane sat in listless idleness. And thus the time went on until a loud knock and ring resounded through the house. Jane lifted her eyes to the clock on the mantel-piece, and saw that it wanted ten minutes to nine.

"Visitors to-night!" she exclaimed, in vexation.

"Don't admit them, Lady Jane," spoke up Miss Snow impulsively, in her sympathy for Lady Jane. "You are not well enough to see them."

Lucy had escaped from the room, and Miss Snow caught her at the dignified pastime of listening. Stretched over the balustrades as far as she could stretch, her ears and eyes were riveted to what was going on in the hall below. The governess administered a sharp reprimand, and ordered her to come away. But Lucy was absorbed, and altogether ignored both Miss Snow and the mandate.

"Do you hear me speak to you, Lady Lucy? Must I come for you?"

Lucy drew away now, but not, as it appeared, in obedience to the governess. Her face wore a puzzled look of surprise, and she went back to the room on tiptoe.

"Jane," said she, scarcely above her breath, "Jane, what do you think? It is papa and Miss Lethwait."

Jane turned round on her chair. "What nonsense, Lucy! Miss Lethwait!"

"It is indeed, Jane. It looks just as though papa had brought her on a visit, and there's some luggage coming into the hall. Miss Lethwait——"

"It cannot be Miss Lethwait," sharply interrupted Lady Jane, her tone betraying annoyance at the very mistake.

"Yes, it is Miss Lethwait," persisted Lucy. "She is dressed so well!—in a rich damask dress and a white bonnet, and an Indian shawl with a gold border. It is just like that Indian shawl of mamma's that you never remove from the drawer and never wear, because you say it puts you too much in mind of her."

"Lucy, you must certainly be dreaming!" reiterated Jane. "Miss Lethwait would never dare to step inside our house again. If——"

Jane stopped. Wilson the footman had come up the stairs and his face wore a blank look.

"I beg your pardon, my lady: the earl has arrived."

"Well?" said Jane.

"He ordered me to come up to you, my lady, and ask whether there was nobody to receive him and—and—Lady Oakburn."

"Bade you ask WHAT?" demanded Jane, bending her haughty eyelids on the servant.

"My lady," returned the man, thinking he would repeat the words as they were given to him, and then perhaps he should escape anger, "what his lordship said was this: 'Go up and see where they are, and ask what's the reason that nobody is about, to receive Lady Oakburn.' Those were the exact words, my lady."

"Is it my aunt, the Dowager Lady Oakburn?" asked Jane in wonder.

"It is Miss Lethwait, my lady. That is to say, she was Miss Lethwait when she lived here."

Lucy was right, then! A ghastly hue overspread the face of Jane Chesney. Not at the unhappy fact—which as yet, strange to say, had not dawned on her mind—but at the insult offered to her by this re-entrance of the governess into their house. Who was she, this Eliza Lethwait, that she should come again, and beard her in her home? Had he, her father, brought her—brought her on a visit, as surmised by Lucy?

The footman had already gone down again. Jane flung aside Miss Snow's wrapperings and prepared to descend. The governess had stood in a state of puzzled amazement, wondering what it all meant. On the stairs Jane encountered Judith. The girl was paler than usual, and very grave.

"My lady," she whispered, arresting Jane's progress, "do you know what has occurred?"

"I know that that person whom I turned from my house has dared to intrude into it again," answered Lady Jane in her wrath, speaking far more openly than it was her custom to speak before a servant. "But she shall not remain in it; no, not for an hour. Let me pass, Judith."

"Oh, my lady, hear the worst before you go in; before you enter upon a contest with her that perhaps she would gain," implored Judith, in her eager sympathy for her mistress. "My lord has married her, and has brought her home."

Jane fell against the wall and looked at Judith, a pitiable expression of helplessness on her face. The girl resumed:

"Pompey says they were married yesterday morning; were married by Miss Lethwait's father in his own church. He says, my lady, he finds it is to Miss Lethwait's the earl has gone lately when he has been absent from town; not to Chesney Oaks."

"Support me, Judith," was the feeble prayer of the unhappy daughter.

Utterly sick and faint was she, and but for Judith's help she would have fallen. She sunk down on the friendly stairs, and let her head rest on them until the faintness had passed. Then she rose, staggering, and went on with what feeble strength was left her.

"I must know the worst," she moaned. "I must know the worst."

Lucy, wondering and timid, stole into the drawing-room after her. Standing by its fire, her face turned to the door in expectation, was she who had quitted the house as Miss Lethwait, only six or seven weeks before. Jane's eyes fell on her dress, as mentioned by Lucy, the rich sweeping silk, the pretty white bonnet, and the costly shawl —*their own mother's shawl!* taken by the earl from its resting-place to bestow on his new bride. Woman's mind is a strange compound of strength and littleness; and to see that shawl on *her* shoulders brought to Jane's heart perhaps the keenest pang of all. The earl was striding the room; his stick, suspiciously restless, coming down loudly with each step. He confronted his two daughters.

"So! here you are at last! And nothing ready, that I see, in the shape of welcome. Not so much as tea laid! What's the reason, Lady Jane?"

"We did not expect you," replied Jane in low tones, her back turned on the ex-governess.

"You had my letter. Wasn't it plain enough?"

"I have not received any letter."

"Not received any letter! By Jove! I'll prosecute the post-office! Girls," with a flourish of his hand towards his wife—"here's your new mother, Lady Oakburn. You don't want a letter to welcome *her*."

It seemed that Jane, at any rate, wanted something, if not a letter. She persistently ignored the presence of the lady, keeping her face turned to her father. But when she tried to address him, no sound issued from her white and quivering lips. The new countess came forward, and humbly, deprecatingly, held out her hand to Jane.

"Lady Jane, I implore you, let there be peace between us. Suffer me to sue for it. It has pleased Lord Oakburn to make me his wife; but indeed I have not come here to interfere with his daughters' privileges or to sow dissension in their home. *Try* to like me, Lady Jane! It will not be difficult to me to love you."

Jane wheeled round, her white lips trembling, her face blazing with scorn.

"Like you!" she repeated, her voice, in her terrible emotion, rising to a hiss. "Like *you!* Can we like the serpent that entwines its deadly coils around its victim? You have brought your

arts to bear on my unsuspicious father, and torn him from his children. As you have dealt with us, Eliza Lethwait, may you so be dealt with when your turn shall come!"

The countess drew back in agitation. She laid her hand on Lucy.

"You at least will let me love you, Lucy! I loved you when I was with you, and I will endeavour to be to you a second mother. This entrance into your home is as embarrassing and painful to me as to you."

Lucy burst into tears as she received the kiss pressed upon her lips. She had liked Miss Lethwait very much, but she did not like her to bring upon them this discomfort.

The earl and his stick, neither of them quite so brave as usual, went off to take refuge in the small room that they had made the library; glad, perhaps, if the truth could be known, that he had a refuge just then in which to hide himself.

"It's new lines to them yet, Eliza," he called out as he went, for the benefit of his rebellious daughters. "To Jane especially. They haven't their sea-legs on at present; but it will be all right in a day or two. Or you shall ask them the reason why."

An exceedingly smart lady's-maid brushed past the earl, brushed past Jane, and addressed her mistress, with whom she had arrived.

"Your chamber is in order now, my lady, and what you will want to-night unpacked. I thought your ladyship might like a fire, and have had one lighted."

The countess passed from the room, glad as the earl, perhaps, to make her escape. Jane grasped a chair in her heart-sickness.

Oh, reader! surely you can feel for her! She was hurled without warning from the post of authority in her father's home, in which she had been mistress for years; *she was hurled from the chief place in her father's heart.* One whom she regarded as in every way beneath her, whom she disliked and despised, over whom she had held control, was exalted into her place; raised over her. She might have borne that bitterness: not patiently, but still she might have borne it: but what she could not bear was that another should become more to her father than she was. He whom she had so revered and loved, he in whom her very life had been bound up, had now taken to himself an idol—and Jane henceforth was nothing.

She dragged her aching limbs back to her dressing-room and cowered down before the fire with a low moan. Judith found her there. The girl had a letter in her hand.

"My lady, Pompey's nearly out of his mind with alarm. He says he'd rather run away back to Africa than that his fault should become known to his master. My lord gave him a letter to post for you yesterday, and he forgot it, and has just found it in his pocket."

Jane mechanically stretched out her hand for the letter; mechanically opened it. It was short and pithy.

"DEAR JANE,—I married Miss Lethwait this morning, and we shall be home to tea to-morrow; have things ship-shape. You behaved ill to her when she was with us, and she felt it keenly, but you'll take care to steer clear of that quicksand for the future; for remember she's my wife now, and will be the mistress of my home.

"Your affectionate father,
"OAKBURN."

Jane crushed the letter in her hand and let her head fall, a convulsive sob that rose in her throat from time to time alone betraying her anguish. If ever iron entered into the soul of woman, it had surely entered into that of Jane Chesney.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

BACK AT THE OLD HOME.

THEY stood together in the library—the earl and his daughter Jane. The morning sun streamed in at the window, playing on the fair smooth hair of Jane, showing all too conspicuously the paleness of her cheek, the utter misery of her countenance. The earl, looking bluff and uncomfortable, paced the carpet restlessly, his stick, for a wonder, lying unheeded in a corner.

It was their first meeting since the moment of his return the previous night. Ah, what a night it had been for Jane! Never for an instant had she closed her eyes. As she went to bed, so she rose; not having once lost consciousness of the blow that had been dealt out to her.

She had heard the earl go into the library, after his breakfast. He had taken it with the countess and Lucy. And Jane, hastily drinking the cup of tea brought to her, which had stood neglected until it was cold, went down and followed him in.

Not to reproach him; not to cast a word of indignation on the usurping countess; simply to speak of herself, and what her future course must be.

"This is no longer a home for me, papa," she quietly began, striving to subdue all outward token of emotion, of the bitter pain that was struggling within her. "I think you must see that it is not. Will you help me to another?"

"Don't talk nonsense, Jane," said the earl testily, wishing he was breasting the waves in a hurricane off the Cape, rather than in this dilemma. "It will all smooth down in a few days, if you'll only let it do so."

Jane lifted her eyes to him, a whole world of anguish in their depths. "I *could not stop* here," she said in low tones, quite painful from their earnestness. "Papa, it would kill me."

And it seemed as if it really would kill her. Lord Oakburn grunted something unintelligible, and looked uncommonly ill-at-ease.

"You must let me go away, papa. Perhaps you will help me to another home?"

"What home? Where d'ye want to go?" he crossly asked.

"I have been thinking that I could go to South Wennock," she said. "I cannot remain in London. The house at South Wennock has not let since we left it; it is lying useless, with its furniture; and, now that winter is approaching, it will not be likely to let. Suffer me to go back to it."

Lord Oakburn took a few strides up and down without reply. Jane stood, as before, near the table, one hand leaning on it, as if for support.

"It's the most rubbishing folly in the world, Jane! You'd be as comfortable at home as ever you were, if you'd only bring your mind to it. Do you suppose she has come into the house to make things unpleasant for us? You don't know her, if you think that. But there!—have it your own way! If you'd like to go back to South Wennock for the winter, you can do so."

"Thank you," answered Jane, with a suppressed sob. "You will allow me sufficient to live upon, papa?"

"I'll see about that," said the earl testily. "Let me know what you want, and I'll do what I can."

"I should like to remain in it, papa: to make it my home for life."

"Stuff, Jane! Before you have been there six months you'll be glad to come back to us."

"You will let me take Lucy, papa?"

"No; I'll be shot if I do!" returned the earl, raising his voice in choler. "I don't approve of your decamping off at all, though I give in to it; but I will never permit Lucy to share in such rebellion. You needn't say more, Jane. If my other daughters leave me, I will keep her."

Jane sighed as she gave up the thought of Lucy. She moved from the table, and held out her hand.

"Good-bye, papa. I shall go to-day."

"Short work, my young lady," was the answer. "You'll come to see the folly of your whim speedily, I hope."

He shook hands with her. But, in his vexation and annoyance,

he did not offer to kiss her, and he did not say "Good-bye." Perhaps he felt vexed at himself as much as at Jane.

She went up to her room. Judith was busy at the dressing-table, and a maid was making the bed. Jane motioned to the latter to quit the chamber.

"I am going back to South Wennock, Judith, to live at the old house on the Rise. I leave for it to-day. Would you like to go, and remain with me?"

Judith looked too surprised to speak. She was dusting a glass toilette-bottle at the moment, and she laid it down in wonder. Jane continued.

"If you do not wish to go with me, I suppose you can remain here with Lady Lucy. They will want a maid for her, unless Lady Oakburn's is to attend upon her. That can be ascertained."

"I will go with you, my lady," said Judith.

"I shall be glad if you will. But mine will be a very quiet household. Only you and another, at the most."

"I would prefer to go with you, my lady."

"Then, Judith, let us hasten with the preparations. We must be away from this house to-day."

Scarcely had she spoken when Lucy came dancing in, her cheeks and her eyes glowing.

"Oh, Jane! I hope we shall all be happy together!" she exclaimed. "I think we can be. Lady Oakburn is so kind. She means to get Miss Snow a nice situation, and to teach me herself. She says she will not entrust my education to any one else."

"I am going away, Lucy," said Jane, drawing the little girl to her. "I wish—I *wish* I could have had you with me! But papa will not——"

"Going away?" repeated Lucy. "Where?"

"I am going back to South Wennock to live there."

"Oh, Jane! And to leave papa! What will he do without you?"

A spasm crossed over Jane Chesney's face. "He has some one else now, Lucy."

Lucy burst into tears. "And I, Jane! What shall I do? You have never been away from me in all my life!"

A struggle with herself, and then Jane's tears burst forth. For the first time since the blow had descended. She laid her face on Lucy's neck, and sobbed aloud.

Only for a few moments did she suffer herself to indulge in grief. "I cannot afford this, child," she said; "I have neither time nor emotion to spare to-day. You must leave me, or I shall not be ready."

Lucy went down, her face wet with tears. Lady Oakburn, who seemed to be taking to her new home with its duties quite naturally, was sorting some of Lucy's music in the drawing-room. She looked

just as she had looked as Miss Lethwait; but she wore this morning a beautiful dress of lama, shot with blue and gold, and a lace cap of guipure. Lucy's noisy entrance and noisy grief caused her to turn abruptly.

"My dear child, what is the matter?"

"Jane is going away," was the sobbing answer.

"Going away!" echoed the countess, not understanding.

"Yes, she is going back to live at South Wennock, she says. She and Judith are packing up to go to-day."

Lady Oakburn was as one struck dumb. For a minute she could neither stir nor speak. Self-reproach was taking possession of her.

"Does your papa know of this, Lucy?"

"Oh yes, I think so," sobbed Lucy. "Jane said she had asked papa to let me go with her, and he would not."

Lady Oakburn quitted the room and went in search ot the earl. He was in the library still, pacing it with his stick now—the stick having just menaced poor Pompey's head, who had come in with a message.

"Lucy tells me that Lady Jane is about to leave," began the countess. "Oh, Lord Oakburn, it is as I feared! I would almost rather have died than come here to sow dissension in your house. Can nothing be done?"

"No, it can't," said the earl. "When Jane's determined upon a thing, she *is* determined. It's the fault of the family, my lady; as you'll find when you have been longer in it."

"But, Lord Oakburn——"

"My dear, look here. All the talking in the world won't alter it, and I'd rather hear no more upon the subject. Jane will go to South Wennock; but I dare say she'll come to her senses before she has lived there many months."

Did a recollection cross the earl's mind of another of his daughters, of whom he had used the self-same words? Clarice! *She* would come to her senses, he said, if left alone. But it seemed she had not come to them yet.

Lady Oakburn, more grieved, more desolate than can well be imagined, for she was feeling herself a wretched interloper, in her lively consciousness, went up to Jane's room and knocked at the door. Jane was alone then. She was standing before a chest of drawers, taking out its contents. The countess was agitated, even to tears.

"Oh, Lady Jane, do not inflict this unhappiness upon me! I wish I had never entered the house, if the consequences are to involve your leaving it."

Jane turned, and stood, calm, impassive, scarcely deigning to raise her haughty eyelids.

"You should have thought of consequences before, madam."

"If you could know how very far from my thoughts it would be to presume in any way upon my position!" continued the countess imploringly. "If you would consent to be still the mistress of the house, Lady Jane——"

"I beg your pardon," interrupted Jane in haughty tones of reproof, as if she would recall her to common sense. "My time is very short," she continued: "may I request to be left alone?"

Lady Oakburn saw there was no help for it—no remedy; and she turned to leave the room with a gesture of grief and pain. "I can only pray that the time may come when you will know me better, Lady Jane. Believe me, I would rather have died than have been the means of turning you from your home."

Taking leave of none but Lucy and Miss Snow, Lady Jane left the house with Judith in the course of the afternoon. Lord Oakburn had gone out: his wife, Jane would not see. And in that impromptu manner Lady Jane returned to South Wennock, and took up her abode again in the old house, startling the woman who had charge of it.

The next day Jane wrote to her father. Her intention was to live as quietly as possible, she told him, keeping only two maids—Judith, to attend upon her personally, and a general servant—and a very modest sum indeed Jane named as an estimate of what it would cost her to live upon. But Lord Oakburn was more liberal, and exactly doubled it. In his answer he told her, her allowance would be at the rate of five hundred a year.

But the past trouble reacted upon Jane, and she became really ill. Mr. John Grey was called in to her. He found her sickness more of the mind than the body, and knew that time alone could work its cure.

"My dear lady, if I were to undertake you as a patient I should only be robbing you," he said to her, at his second interview. "Tonics? Well, you shall have some if you like; but your best tonic will be time."

She saw that he divined how cruel had been the blow of the earl's marriage, the news of which had caused quite a commotion in South Wennock. Even this remote allusion to it Jane would have resented in some; but there was that about Mr. Grey that seemed to draw her to him as a friend. She sat at the table in the small square drawing-room—small, as compared with some of the rooms to which she had lately been accustomed—and leaned her cheek upon her hand. Mr. Grey was seated on the other side the hearth, opposite to her. It was growing towards evening, and the red blaze of the fire played on Jane's pale face.

"Yes," she acknowledged, "it is time alone that can do much for me, I believe. I feel—I feel that I shall never be happy again. But I should like some tonic medicine, Mr. Grey."

"You shall have it, Lady Jane. I fancy you are naturally not very strong."

"Not very strong, perhaps. But I have hitherto enjoyed good health. Are there any changes in South Wennock?" she continued, not sorry to quit the subject of self.

"No, I think not," he answered; "nothing in particular, that would interest you. A few people have died; a few have married: as is the case in all places."

"Does Mr. Carlton get much practice?" she asked, overcoming her repugnance to speak of that gentleman in her wish for some information as to how he and Laura were progressing.

"He gets a great deal," said Mr. Grey. "The fact is, quite a tide has set in against my brother, of which Mr. Carlton reaps the benefit."

"I do not understand," said Jane.

"People seem to have taken a dislike to my brother, on account of that unhappy affair in Palace Street," he explained. "Or rather, I should say, to distrust him. In short, people won't have Mr. Stephen Grey to attend them any longer. If I can't go, they run for Mr. Carlton, and thus he has now a great many of our former patients. South Wennock is a terrible place for gossip; every one must interfere with his neighbour's affairs. Just now," added Mr. John Grey, with a genial smile, "the town is commenting on Lady Jane Chesney's having called me in, instead of Mr. Carlton, her sister's husband."

Jane shook her head. "I dislike Mr. Carlton personally very much," she said. "Had he never entered our family to sow dissension in it, I should still have disliked him. But this must be a great trouble to Mr. Stephen Grey."

"It is a great annoyance. I wonder sometimes that Stephen puts up with it so patiently. 'It will come round in time,' is all he says."

"Has any clue been obtained to the unfortunate lady who died?" asked Jane.

"Not the slightest. She lies, poor thing, in the corner of St. Mark's Churchyard, unclaimed and unknown."

"But, has her husband never come forward to inquire after her?" exclaimed Lady Jane, in wonder. "It was said at the time, I remember, that he was travelling abroad. Surely he must have returned?"

"No one whatever has come forward," was Mr. Grey's reply. "Neither he nor any one else. In short, Lady Jane, but for that humble grave and the obloquy that has become the property of my brother Stephen, the whole affair might well seem a myth; a something that had only happened in a dream."

"Does it not strike you as being altogether very singular?" said Lady Jane, after a pause. "The affair itself, I mean."

"Very much so indeed. It so impressed me at the time of the occurrence; far more than it did my brother."

"It would almost seem as though—as though the poor young lady had had no husband," concluded Lady Jane. "If it be not uncharitable to the dead to say so."

"That is the opinion I incline to," avowed Mr. John Grey. "My brother, on the contrary, will not entertain it; he feels certain, he says, that in that respect things were as straight as they ought to be. But for one thing, I should adopt my opinion indubitably, and go on, as a natural sequence, to the belief that she herself introduced the fatal drops into the draught."

"And that one thing—what is it?" asked Jane, interested in spite of her own cares. But indeed the tragedy from the first had borne much interest for her—as it had for every one else in South Wennock.

"The face that was seen on the stairs by Mr. Carlton."

"But I thought Mr. Carlton maintained afterwards that he had not seen any face there—that it was a misapprehension of his own?"

"Rely upon it, Mr. Carlton did see a face there, Lady Jane. The impression conveyed to his mind at the moment was, that a face—let us say a man's—was there; and I believe it to have been a right one. The doubt arose to him afterwards with the improbability: and, for one thing, he may *wish* to believe that there was no one there, and to impress that belief upon others."

"But why should he wish to do that?" asked Jane.

"Because he must be aware that it was very careless of him not to have put the matter beyond doubt at the time. To see a man hovering in that stealthy manner near a sick lady's room would be the signal for unearthing him to most medical attendants. It ought to have been so to Mr. Carlton; and he is no doubt secretly blaming himself for not having done it."

"I thought he did search."

"Yes, superficially. He carried out a candle and looked around. But he should have remained on the landing, and called to those below to bring lights, so as not to allow a chance of escape. Of course, he had no thought of evil at the time."

"And you connect that man with the evil?"

"I do," said Mr. Grey, as he rose to leave. "There's not a shadow of doubt in my mind that that man was the author of Mrs. Crane's death."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

FREDERICK GREY'S "CROTCHET."

THAT a strong tide, flowing from one end of South Wennock to the other, had set in against Mr. Stephen Grey, was an indisputable fact. Immediately after the inquest on Mrs. Crane, public opinion had gone in his favour; people seemed ashamed of having suspected him of so fatal an error, and they made much of Mr. Stephen Grey. This continued for a week or two, and then the current changed. One insinuated a doubt, another insinuated a doubt; some said Mr. Stephen had been culpably negligent; others said he had taken too much champagne. And the current against the surgeon went flowing on until it threatened to engulf him in its angry torrent.

Another undoubted fact was, that a great inciter to this feeling was Mr. Carlton. It was he who did most towards fanning the flame. This was not generally known, for Mr. Carlton's work was partially done in secret; but still it did in a measure ooze out, especially to the Greys. That Mr. Carlton's motive must be that of increasing his own practice, was universally assumed; but it was a dishonest, underhand way of doing it, and it caused young Frederick Grey to boil over with indignation.

On a sofa in the house of Mr. Stephen Grey, lay a lady with a pale face and delicate features. It was Stephen Grey's wife. She had just returned home after seven or eight months' absence at the continental spas, whither she had gone with her sister, a wealthy widow, hoping to pick up renewed health; for she, Mrs. Grey, suffered always from an affection of the spine.

Frederick was bending over her. The boy loved nothing so much on earth as his mother. He was narrating to her all the wonders, pleasant and unpleasant, that had occurred during her absence: the tragedy which had taken place in Palace Street, and its present consequences to Mr. Stephen Grey, naturally forming a principal topic. This had not been written of to Mrs. Grey. "As well not disturb her with disagreeable matters," Mr. Stephen had remarked at the time. She was growing excited over the recital, and she suddenly sat up, looking her son full in the face.

"I cannot understand, Frederick. Either your papa did put the opium into the mixture——"

"Prussic acid, mamma."

"Prussic acid! What made my thoughts run upon opium?—talking of a sleeping draught, I suppose. Either your papa did put the prussic acid into the mixture, or he did not——"

"Dearest mamma, do I not tell you that he did not? I watched him make it up; I watched every drop of everything he put into it. There was no more poison in that draught than there is in this glass of water at your elbow."

"My dear, I do not dispute it: I should be excessively astonished to hear that your papa had been careless enough to do such a thing. What I want to know is this—with your testimony and your Uncle John's combined, with the experience of *years* that they have had of your father, and with the favourable verdict of the coroner's jury, why have people taken up this prejudice against him?"

"Because they are fools," logically answered Frederick. "I don't suppose there are ten people in the place who would call in papa now. It makes Uncle John so mad!"

"It must give him a great deal of extra work," observed Mrs. Stephen Grey.

"He is nearly worked off his legs. Some of our patients have gone over altogether to the enemy, Carlton. It is he who is the chief mover against papa. And he does it in such a sneaking, mean way. 'I am grieved to be called in to take the place of Mr. Stephen Grey,' he says. 'No man can more highly respect him than I do, or deplore more deeply the lamentable mistake. I cannot but think he will be cautious for the future: still, when the lives of those dear to us, our wives and children, are at stake'——"

Mrs. Grey could not avoid an interrupting laugh, Frederick was imitating Mr. Carlton so quaintly.

"How do you know he says this to people?" she asked.

"Plenty of them could bear testimony to the fact, mamma. And it does its work all too well."

"And what is Mr. Carlton's motive?"

"To get our patients away from us, of course. Now that he has married an earl's daughter, he can't do with a small income. I wrote you word, you know, about his running away with Miss Laura Chesney. They met with a series of disasters in their flight; were pitched out of Mr. Carlton's carriage into the mud, and Miss Laura lost one of her shoes. She's Lady Laura now—and was then, for that matter, if they had only known it: it's said that Mr. Carlton did know it. They were married at Gretna Green, or one of those convenient places; and when they came back to South Wennock were married again. You should have seen St. Mark's Church. Crowds upon crowds pushed into it."

"And you amidst the rest, I suppose," remarked Mrs. Grey.

Frederick laughed. "Carlton was as white as a sheet, and kept looking round as if he feared some interruption. Bad men are always cowards. By the way, Lady Jane has come back to the house on the Rise."

"My boy, do you know I think you are too bitter against Mr. Carlton. It was certainly not a right thing to run away with a young lady, but that is not our affair; and it is very wrong to incite people against your papa—if he does do it; but, with all that, you are scarcely justified in calling him a bad man."

"Ah, but that's not all," said Frederick. "Mother, I hate Mr. Carlton! As to being bitter against him, I only wish I could be bitter; bitter to some purpose."

"Frederick!"

The boy half sank upon his knees bringing his face on a level with Mrs. Grey's, and lowered his voice to a whisper.

"I believe it was Mr. Carlton who put the prussic acid into the draught."

Mrs. Grey, startled to tremor, almost to anger, *frightened* at the temerity of Frederick, could only stare at him.

"Look here," he continued, in some excitement. "The draught went out of our house right, I *know*, and the boy delivered it as it was sent. Why then did Mr. Carlton take it when it arrived, and exclaim that it smelt of prussic acid? It *could not* have smelt of prussic acid then; or, if it did, some magic had been at work."

Mrs. Grey knew how fond her son was of fancies, but she had never seen him so terribly earnest as this. She put up her hand to arrest his words.

"It is of no use, mother; I must speak. This suspicion of Mr. Carlton fell upon me that night. When we heard of the death, I and Uncle John went down to Palace Street. Carlton was in the room, and he began talking of what had taken place, and of his own share in the previous events of the evening: how he had smelt the draught on its being brought in, and his coming off to ask Mr. Stephen Grey whether it was all right, and then going home and making up a draught on his own account and not getting back with it in time. He told all this readily and glibly, and Uncle John and Mr. Lycett took it in for gospel; but I did not. A feeling suddenly came over me that he was acting a part. He was too frank, too voluble; it was exactly as though he were rehearsing a tale learnt by heart; and I declare that a conviction flashed into my mind that it was he who had done it all."

"You frighten me to faintness," gasped Mrs. Grey. "Have you reflected on what might be the awful consequences to Mr. Carlton were such an accusation to get abroad?"

"I am not going to speak of it abroad; but, mother, I must tell *you:* it has been burning my heart away since that night. I dare not breathe it to papa or to Uncle John: they would call it one of my fancies, and say I was only fit for Bedlam. But *you* know how often you have been surprised at the quickness with which I read

people and their motives, and you have called it a gift from God. That Carlton was acting a part that night, I am certain; there was truth neither in his eye nor on his lip. He saw that I doubted him, too, and wanted to get me from the chamber. Well, that was the first phase in my suspicion; and the next was his manner at the inquest. The same glib, ready tale was on his tongue; he seemed to have the whole story at his fingers' ends. The coroner complimented him on the straightforward way in which he gave his evidence; but I know that I read LIE in it from beginning to end."

"Answer me a question, Frederick. What has so prejudiced you against Mr. Carlton?"

"I was not previously prejudiced against him. I declare to you, mamma, that when I entered the room where the poor lady lay dead, I had not, and never had had, any prejudice against Mr. Carlton. I had felt rather glad that he set up in the place, because papa and Uncle John and Whittaker were so worried with the extent of the practice. It was when he spoke of the draught that an inward conviction stole over me that he was speaking falsely, deceitfully, and that he knew more about it than he cared to say."

"I should call it an inward fiddlestick, were the subject less awfully serious," reproved Mrs. Grey. "It would be better for you to bring reason and common sense to bear upon this, Frederick, than an 'inward conviction' vague and visionary. Was this young lady not a stranger to Mr. Carlton?"

"I expect she was. To him as well as to us."

"Very well. What motive, then, could Mr. Carlton have had to harm her? The very worst man permitted to live on earth would not poison a fellow-creature, and a stranger, for the sake of pastime; and Mr. Carlton is an educated man, a man of a certain refinement; and, so far as I have seen—for I met him two or three times before I left home—he is pleasant and agreeable. Assuming, for the moment's argument, that your views were correct, what *motive* could have actuated Mr. Carlton?"

Frederick Grey leaned his head on his hand. The question was a poser; in fact, it was the precise point that had puzzled him throughout. Judith Ford, the widow Gould, Mr. Stephen himself, had all testified that the lady had come to South Wennock a stranger to Mr. Carlton as to the Greys.

"I don't deny that that's a point difficult to get over, or that the case is completely shrouded in mystery," he confessed at length. "It puzzles me so that sometimes I can't sleep, and I get thinking that I must be wronging Carlton. I ask myself what he meant to gain by it. Nothing, that I can see. Of course he now keeps up the prejudice against papa to get his patients; but he could not have entered upon it from that motive——"

"For shame, Frederick!"

"Dear mamma, I am sorry you are so vexed, and I wish I had not mentioned it at all. I tell you I have lain awake night after night, thinking it over in all its aspects, and I see that any probable increase of practice could not have been his motive, for the draught might have been made up by me or by Mr. Whittaker, for all Mr. Carlton knew; and in that case the odium could not have fallen upon papa. I see that you are angry with me, and I only wish I could dismiss this suspicion of Carlton from my mind. There is one loophole for him; that the man he saw concealed on the stairs may have been the villain, after all."

"What man? What stairs?" exclaimed Mrs. Grey in astonishment.

"As Mr. Carlton was leaving the sick lady's room that same night, he saw—Hush! Here's papa!" cried the boy, breaking off abruptly. "Don't breathe a word of what I have been saying, there's a dear mother."

Mr. Stephen Grey came in, a gloomy cloud on his usually cheerful face. He threw himself into an arm-chair opposite his wife's sofa, his mood one of great weariness.

"Are you tired, Stephen?" she asked.

"Tired to death," he answered; "tired of it all. We shall have to make a move."

"A move!" she repeated, while Frederick turned from the window, where he was now standing, and looked at his father.

"We must remove from this place, Mary, to one where the gossip of Stephen Grey having supplied poison in mistake for good medicine will not have penetrated. It grows worse every day, and John's temper is tried. No wonder: he is worked like a horse. Just now he came in, jaded and tired, and found three messengers waiting to see him, ready to squabble among themselves who should get him first. 'I am really unable to go,' he said. 'I have been with a patient for the last seven hours, and am good for nothing. Mr. Stephen will attend.' No, there was not one would have Mr. Stephen: their orders were, Mr. Grey or nobody. John has gone, unfit as he is to do so: but this sort of thing cannot last."

"Of course it cannot," said Mrs. Stephen Grey. "How extraordinary it is! Why should people be so prejudiced in the face of evident facts?"

"I had a talk with John yesterday, and broached to him what has been in my own mind for weeks. He and I must part. John must take a partner who will be more palatable to South Wennock than I now am, and I must try my fortune elsewhere. If I am to be ruined, it is no use dragging John down with me: and, were I to remain with him, I believe the whole practice would be taken from us."

Mrs. Grey's heart sank within her. Can any one wonder?—hearing that her home of years must be broken up. "Where could we go to?" she cried in agitation.

"I don't know. Perhaps London would be best. There, a person does not know his next-door neighbour, and no one will know me as the unfortunate practitioner from South Wennock."

"It is a great misfortune to have fallen upon us!" she murmured.

"It is unmerited," returned Stephen Grey; "that's my great consolation. God knows how innocent I was in that unhappy business, and I trust He will help me to earn a living elsewhere. It's possible that it may turn out for the best in the end."

"What man was it that Mr. Carlton saw on the stairs that night?" inquired Mrs. Grey, after a pause, her thoughts reverting, in spite of herself, from their own troubles. And Frederick, as he heard the question, glanced uneasily at his mother, lest she should be about to betray his confidence.

"No one can tell. And Carlton fancied afterwards that he might have been mistaken—that the moonlight deceived him. But there's not the least doubt that some one *was* there, concealing himself, and I and John have privately urged it upon the police never to cease their search for him. That man was the culprit."

"You think so?" cried Mrs. Stephen, after a pause.

"I feel sure of it. No reasonable being can entertain a doubt of it. But for this mistaken idea that people have picked up—that the mistake was mine in mixing the sleeping draught—there would not be two opinions upon it in the town. The only point I cannot understand, is—Carlton's having smelt the poison in the draught when it was delivered; but I can only come to the conclusion that Carlton was mistaken, unaccountable as it seems for him to have fancied a smell where no smell was."

"How full of mystery it all sounds!"

"The affair is a mystery altogether; it's nothing but mystery from beginning to end. Of course the conclusion drawn is—and the coroner was the first to draw it—that that man was the ill-fated young lady's husband, stolen into the house for the purpose of deliberately destroying her. If so, we may rest satisfied that it will be cleared up sometime, for murder is safe to come out, sooner or later."

As Stephen Grey concluded the last words he quitted the room. Mrs. Grey rose and approached her son.

"My dear, you hear what your papa says. How is it possible that you can suffer your suspicions to stray to any other than that man upon the stairs?"

The boy turned, and wound his mother's arm about him as he answered, his frank, earnest eyes lifted trustingly to hers.

"I am just puzzled to death over it, mother mine. I don't feel a doubt but that some wicked fellow was there; I can't doubt it; and of course he was not there for any good. Still, I cannot get over that impression of falseness made upon me by Mr. Carlton. There is such a thing as bribery, you know."

"Bribery!" repeated Mrs. Grey, not following his drift.

"If Carlton did not commit the evil himself, he may be keeping the counsel of the man who did. Mother dear, don't take your arm from me in anger. I *can't* drive the feeling away from me. Mr. Carlton may not have been the actual culprit; but, that he knows more of the matter than he suffers to appear, I am as certain of as that I am living."

And Mrs. Stephen Grey shivered within her as she listened to the words, terrified for the consequences should they be overheard.

"Frederick, this is nothing but one of your crotchets. Be still; be still!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

AN UNLUCKY ENCOUNTER.

RECLINING languidly in an easy chair one bright afternoon, was Lady Jane Chesney. The reaction of the passionate excitement, arising from the blow dealt out to her so suddenly, had set in, and she felt utterly weary both in mind and body. Some little bustle and talking was heard outside, as if a visitor had entered, and then the room door opened. There stood Laura Carlton.

"Well, Jane! I suppose I may venture to come in?"

She spoke in a half laughing, half deprecating tone, and looked out daringly at Jane from her dazzling beauty. A soft damask glowed in her cheek, a brilliant light in her eye. She wore a rich silk dress with brocaded flounces, and a white lace bonnet all gossamer and prettiness. Jane retained her hand as she gazed at her.

"You are happy, Laura?"

"Oh, so happy!" was the answer. "But I want to be reconciled to you all. Papa is dreadfully obstinate when he is crossed, I know that; but he need not hold out so long. And you, Jane, to have been here going on for a fortnight, and not to have taken any notice of me!"

"I have been ill," said Jane.

"Oh, I dare say! I suppose the fact is, papa forbade you to call at my house, or to receive me here."

"No, he did not. But let us come to a thorough understanding at once, Laura, as you are here: it may spare trouble to both of us;

perhaps some heart-burning. I must decline, myself, to visit at your house. I will receive you here with pleasure, and be happy to see you whenever you like to come; but I cannot receive Mr. Carlton."

"Why will you not visit at my house?"

"Because it is Mr. Carlton's. I would prefer not to meet him—anywhere."

Laura's resentment bubbled up. "Is your prejudice against Mr. Carlton to last for ever?"

"I cannot say. I confess that it is strong against him at present. I never liked him, Laura; and his underhand conduct with regard to you has not tended to lessen that dislike. I cannot extend my hand in greeting to Mr. Carlton. It is altogether better that we should not meet. Like him, I never can."

"And never will, so long as you persist in shutting yourself out from all intercourse with him," retorted Laura. "What! would it hurt you, Jane, to meet my husband?"

"We will drop the subject," said Jane. "To pursue it would produce no good result. When I tell you that my own feelings (call them prejudices if you will) forbid me to see Mr. Carlton, I tell you truth. And some deference is due to the feelings of my father. I will not reproach you, Laura, for the step you took: the time has gone by for that; but you must not ask me to countenance Mr. Carlton."

"You speak of deference to papa's feelings, Jane! I don't think he showed much to yours. What a simpleton he has made of himself!"

Jane Chesney's face burnt with a sudden glow, and her drooping eyelids were not raised. The old spirit, always ready to uphold her father, whether he was right or whether he was wrong, had gone out of her crushed heart for ever.

"What sort of a woman is she?" resumed Laura.

"Oh, Laura, what matters it?" Jane answered in a tone that betrayed how full of pain was the subject. "He has married her, and that is enough. I cannot talk of it?"

"Why did you not bring away Lucy?"

"I was not permitted to bring her."

"And do you mean to say that you shall live here, all by yourself?"

"With whom have I to live? I may as well occupy this house as any other. My income will afford nothing better. *That* I do not repine at; it is enough for me; and to be able to live at peace in it is a great improvement upon the embarrassment we used to undergo in the days gone by."

"But it is so lonely an existence for you! It seems like isolation."

Jane was silent. The sense of her lonely lot was all too present with her as her sister spoke: but she knew that she must *bear* it.

"How much are you to be allowed, Jane."

"Five hundred a year."

'Five hundred a year for the Lady Jane Chesney!" returned Laura, with flashing eyes. "It is not half enough, Jane."

"It is enough for comfort. And grandeur I have done with. May I express a hope, Laura, that you find your income equal to your expectations," she added in a spirit of kindness.

Laura's colour deepened. Laura was learning to estimate herself by her new standard, as the Earl of Oakburn's daughter; she was longing for the display and luxury that rank generally gives. But Mr. Carlton's father had not come forward with assistance; and they had to content themselves with what Mr. Carlton made by his profession. He had been compelled to tell his wife she must practise economy; and every hour of the day Laura caught herself wishing for a thousand and one articles that only wealth can purchase. Her vanity had certainly not lessened with her accession to a title.

"I think it shameful of papa not to allow me an income, now that he enjoys the Chesney estates, or else present my husband with a sufficient sum of money," exclaimed Laura in resentful tones. "Mr. Carlton, I am sure, feels his injustice, though he does not speak of it."

"Injustice!" interrupted Jane with marked emphasis.

"Yes, it is unjust; shamefully unjust. What was my offence?—that I chose the husband he would have denied me. And now look at what he has done?—married a woman obnoxious to us all. If it was derogatory in Miss Laura Chesney to choose a surgeon when she had not a cross or a coin to bless herself with, I wonder what it is for the Earl of Oakburn to lower himself to his daughter's governess?"

Jane made no reply. There was some logic in Laura's reasoning; although she appeared to ignore the fact that she owed obedience to her father, and had forfeited it.

"You were devoted to him, Jane, and how has he repaid you? Just done that which has driven you from home. He has driven you away with as little compunction, I dare say, as he would drive away a dog.—Jane, be quiet; I will say what I have to say. He has his new lady, and much value you and I are to him henceforth!"

"You are wrong, Laura," Jane answered with emotion. "I came away of my own free will when he would have kept me. He—but I—I—cannot bear to speak of it. I do not defend his marriage; but he is not the first man who has been led away by a designing woman."

"He is a hard man," persisted Laura, working herself into a state of agitation; "he is heartless as the grave. Why else has he not forgiven Clarice?"

"Clarice! He has forgiven her."

"Has he!" returned Laura, upon whom the words acted as a check. "She is not at home. I am sure she's not!"

Jane dropped her voice, "We cannot find Clarice, Laura."

"Not find Clarice! What do you mean?"

"Simply what I say: we cannot find her. I sought out the situation she was at in Gloucester Terrace,—in fact, she was at two situations there, one after the other, but she did not remain long in either. She left the last a twelvemonth ago last June, and no trace of her since then can be discovered. Our only conjecture is, that she must have gone to the Continent with some family, or abroad elsewhere. Papa has caused the lists of passports at the most frequented ports to be searched, but without success; but that we think little of, as she may have been entered merely as 'the governess.' In short, we have searched for her in all ways, and the police have searched; and we can hear nothing of her. The uneasiness this gives me, Laura, I cannot express to you; and papa—in spite of your opinion of his heartlessness—is as much troubled as I am."

"I never heard of such a thing," exclaimed Laura, when her astonishment allowed her to speak. "Not find Clarice!"

In her eagerness she reiterated question upon question, and Jane told her all the particulars she had been able to glean. They were with difficulty received.

"Nothing at all has been heard of her since last June—that is June twelvemonth?" repeated Laura. "But, Jane, you had letters from her after that?"

"I know I had; one; but it gave me no clue to where she was. It was the letter that came to us last New Year's day, to wish us the *bonne année*."

"That was not the last letter you had from her?"

"Yes, it was. I wrote three letters to her afterwards, and found them lying at the library, unclaimed. Do you recollect my telling you of a singular dream I had, relating to Clarice—a disagreeable dream?"

"I recollect your *not* telling it me," replied Laura. "You said you had a dream that troubled you, but you would not narrate it, fearing my ridicule."

"Yes," said Jane: "it was in March. The dream made me very uneasy, and I wrote, as I tell you, more than once to Clarice, begging tidings of her. They were the letters I speak of. Every phase of that dream is as vivid to my mind now as it was then. There are moments when the superstition is all too strong upon me that it only shadowed forth the reality of Clarice's fate. I seem to *know* that we shall never find her—in life."

Laura would have liked to use ridicule then. "Can't you tell me the dream, Jane?"

"No," shuddered Jane, "I cannot tell it. Least of all to you."

Laura became curious. "Why least of all to me?"

"Because—because—in the same dream, mixed up with Clarice, mixed up with the horror—but, I am foolish, I think," broke off Jane. "I shall say no more about it, Laura."

Laura did not care. She had been in the habit of laughing at Jane's dreams, and she would laugh still. Jane Chesney had certainly had two or three most singular dreams, which had borne reference in a remarkable degree to subsequent realities of life. One of them had foreshadowed her mother's death, and Jane had related it before the death took place. That the events following upon and bearing out the dreams were singular coincidences, can at least be said. And yet Jane Chesney was not by nature inclined to superstition; the dreams had, in a degree, forced it upon her. She buried the feeling within herself, as we all like to bury those feelings which touch wholly on the imagination—that inner life within the life. But of all her dreams, never had she been visited by one bearing half the vivid horror, the horror of *reality*, as did this last one relating to her sister Clarice.

"It is very deceitful of you, Jane, to persist to my face that you have not heard from Clarice since the new year," resumed Laura.

Jane raised her eyelids. "I have not heard from her since."

"Where's the use of saying so, Jane?" and Laura's voice became peevish, for she had as much dislike to be kept in the dark as had her father the earl. "You know quite well that you had at least one letter after that, and a most affectionate and loving one."

Jane was surprised. "I do not know what your head is running upon, Laura, but I do know that I never had a line or syllable from Clarice after that January letter."

Laura took out her purse, a handsome portemonnaie, the gift of Mr. Carlton, and extracted from it a small piece of paper that had once formed part of a letter.

"Look there, Jane. You know Clarice's writing: is that hers or is it not? I put it into my purse to-day to bring it to you."

"Oh yes, it is Clarice's writing," said Jane, the instant it was in her hands. It was the upper part of the first page of the letter, and was dated from London on the 28th of the previous February. It began as follows:

"My dearest, I am about to make a proposal to you, and——"

Then the paper was torn. On the reverse side was the conclusion of the note, which had apparently been a short one.

"——without delay. Ever your own Clarice."

Jane Chesney pondered over the words, especially over the date. But she had never seen the note in her life before, and said so.

"Nonsense," said Laura. "If it was not addressed to you, Jane,

to whom was it addressed? Clarice never wrote home to any one except you after her departure."

"How did you become possessed of this?" inquired Jane.

"It came from home with my clothes."

"Impossible," said Jane. "I collected your things myself and packed them. There was no such scrap of paper, as this, amongst them."

"I tell you, Jane, it came to me in my box. Some little time ago a pair of my lace sleeves were mislaid. I was angry with my maid, and turned the drawer, where my lace things are kept, out upon the floor. In picking them up to replace them, I found this paper. That it had come from home with my laces is certain, for they were emptied straight from the trunk into that drawer. And there it must have remained since unnoticed, probably slipped under the paper laid at the bottom of the drawer."

"It appears to me inexplicable," returned Jane. "I know that I never received the note; and, as you say, Clarice wrote home only to me. But she never worded her letters in that strain: it is more as a wife would write to her husband."

"The display of affection struck me," said Laura. "I thought she had suddenly grown very affectionate."

"Clarice has too much good sense to indulge in foolishly fond expressions," said Jane. "I cannot understand this," she resumed. "It seems all on a par with the rest, full of nothing but mystery. Will you give me this scrap of paper, Laura?"

"You may keep it, and welcome. I hope we shall soon hear of her. It is so dreadfully inconsistent for Lady Clarice Chesney, or Lady any one else, to be earning her living as a governess. But I suppose she is abroad and cannot have heard of the change. Jane —to leave the subject—do you know that I saw papa at Pembury?"

"No."

"I did. I was visiting Colonel and Mrs. Marden, they are such nice people—but you know them yourself. I was driving through the street in the pony-carriage with Mrs. Marden, and we met Sir James's mail-cart, he and papa in it. Between astonishment and fear I was nearly frightened out of my wits. I pulled the reins and started the ponies off, and the next day we heard that papa had left again."

"Are you going?" asked Jane, for Laura had risen.

"I must go now. I shall come in again soon, for I have not said half I wanted to say, or remembered half the questions I wished to ask. Good-bye, Jane; come with me as far as the gate."

"I don't feel well enough to go out," was Jane's answer.

"Nonsense, that's all fancy. A minute's walk in this bright sunshine will do you good."

Jane yielded. She muffled herself up and accompanied Laura to the gate. It was a warm autumn day, the changing leaves glinting in the brilliant sunshine. Jane really did feel that the air revived her, and did not immediately hasten indoors.

Laura shook hands and proceeded down the road. Just after she had passed its bend, she encountered her husband. He was advancing with a quick step, swinging a cane in his hand.

"Oh, Lewis, were you coming in search of me?"

"Not I," said Mr. Carlton, laughing. "It would take I don't know what amount of moral courage to venture into the precincts of my enemy, Lady Jane. Has it been a stormy interview, Laura?"

"It has been a very pleasant one. Not that Jane is a model of suavity in all things. She tells me I may go and see her whenever I please, but you are not to go, and she won't come to my house."

"Then I'd retaliate, Laura, by not going to hers."

"Oh, I don't know," was Laura's careless answer. "I should like to see her sometimes, and I dare say she'll come round after a time. Won't you walk home with me, Lewis?"

"I cannot, my dearest. A patient is waiting for me."

"Who is it?"

"A farmer's wife: no one you know. She is very ill."

They parted. Laura went towards home and Mr. Carlton continued his way up the Rise. As he passed the bend, he became aware that some one was advancing from an opposite direction, and recognized young Frederick Grey. And Master Frederick was in a fiery temper.

A word of explanation as to its cause is necessary. At the Michaelmas just past, a Mr. Thrupp and his wife, people from a distance, had come to live at a small farm a little beyond the Rise. A short time after taking possession, the wife was seized with illness, and Mr. Carlton was called in. The farmer knew nothing and had heard nothing of the merits of the different practitioners of the place, but Mr. Carlton lived nearest to him, and therefore he was summoned.

Mr. Carlton obeyed the call. But the case assumed an alarming aspect, and after a few days he suggested that another doctor should meet him in consultation, and mentioned Mr. John Grey. The farmer, Mr. Thrupp, went to the Greys' residence, to request Mr. John's attendance early the following morning. Mr. John was out, but Mr. Stephen was in; and the farmer knowing nothing of the prejudice against the latter, arranged that he should go instead of his brother. Mr. Carlton was very much surprised to meet *him*. He said nothing in his presence, but he remained to say it after Mr. Stephen had departed. This was on the morning of the day when Lady Laura had called upon her sister. Mr. Carlton was now on

his way to the farm, unconscious that Frederick Grey, bearing down upon him, had just left it.

In point of fact, Frederick had been sent up by his father to inquire the result of certain remedies ordered at the consultation. On the boy's arrival there the farmer came out to speak with him.

"You are perhaps a relation of the Mr. Greys', sir?" said he, after replying to the inquiries of Frederick.

"I am Mr. Stephen Grey's son. Why?"

Mr. Thrupp, a simple-looking man, scratched his head.

"Then perhaps you'll be good enough to say, sir, that we'd rather the gentleman didn't come again," he resumed, bringing the words out with hesitation, for he did not much like to speak them. "It has so flustered my wife to hear that he sometimes sends poison by mistake in his physic bottles, that his visit has done her more harm than good. She is a trifle better, and she thinks Dr. Carlton can get her round now by himself. If you'll be just good enough to say so, sir, to Mr. Stephen Grey, with our thanks for his visit of this morning."

The indignant red dyed Frederick Grey's features. "Who in the world told you that calumny of my father?" he asked.

"No offence, sir," returned the farmer civilly. "I'm sure I don't intend any, personally, for we know nothing but what we hear. After the gentleman had left, the other one, Dr. Carlton, asked how we could think of calling him into the house. He said it might cost us our lives some time, for he was not particular in making up his medicines, and one lady had died through it. The other brother, Mr. John, was quite reliable, he said, and it was him he had told me to call in. I asked my next-door neighbour whether it was true, and he said it was true that a lady did die after taking some physic sent by him. It gave my wife such a turn, sir, that we feared she was going—and perhaps you'll please tell him, not meaning any offence, that we'd rather he didn't come again."

Frederick Grey quitted the farmer, his blood rising up against the injustice done his father, against the malice (as he regarded it) of Mr. Carlton. It was in returning from this very unsatisfactory interview, and when Master Frederick was in this very unsatisfactory temper, that the two unhappily came into contact, meeting exactly opposite the gate of Lady Jane Chesney.

Lady Jane might be called a third party at the interview. She had taken a turn on the path after the departure of Laura, and on nearing the gate again heard footsteps in the road, and looked out incidentally. There was Mr. Carlton close to her on the one side and Stephen Grey's son on the other. Not caring to be so much as seen by the surgeon, she stepped behind the hedge until he should have passed.

But they were not to pass so soon. Mr. Carlton was striding on with a half indifferent, half supercilious nod to the boy, when the latter, bold, fearless, and angry, placed himself in his path.

"Don't brush by me so quickly, if you please, Mr. Carlton. I'll thank you to explain first what it is you have been saying at Thrupp's farm about my father."

Mr. Carlton stared at him, stared more especially at the address; and the supercilious expression deepened on his countenance.

"You are in a temper, I should think, young sir," was the answer, delivered with stinging blandness. "I and Mr. Stephen Grey can settle our own affairs without your aid."

The tone turned Frederick half mad, and he forgot his prudence. "You are a wicked, designing man," he burst forth. "You have been working in an underhand manner to drive my father from the place; not a day passes but you are secretly traducing him. Why don't you do it openly to his face, Mr. Carlton? Why do you do it behind his back, when he can't defend himself?"

"I don't know what you mean," said Mr. Carlton. "Stand aside, and let me pass."

"You do know what I mean," retorted the boy, keeping his place before Mr. Carlton, so that the surgeon could not pass. "He met you in consultation at Thrupp's this morning, and the moment his back was turned you began to prejudice their minds against him; saying he was in the habit of sending out poisoned medicines, and it frightened the woman so, that they will not have him again. And this has been your game for months. How dare you continue to assert that my father poisoned the draught that night when you know he did not? When you *know* it, I say!"

Mr. Carlton lifted his cane menacingly. "But for the respect I bear your uncle, as my brother-practitioner, and your father also, in spite of the error he committed, I would lay this about your shoulders, young gentleman, and teach you better manners."

Master Frederick's passion was not calmed by the threat, and it may be questioned if he even knew in that wild moment the danger of the words he was about to utter.

"You know, I say, that Mr. Stephen Grey did *not* commit the error. You know that it was *you* who dropped the poison into the draught when you were alone with it after it was delivered. Keep your cane off me, Mr. Carlton; blows will not mend murder. If it was not you, it was that villain you saw on the stairs, and you, perhaps by bribery, undertook to keep his counsel and turn suspicion from him. You saw that I suspected you the very night it was done; you saw that I suspected you when you were giving your plausible evidence at the inquest. What the poor young lady had done to you, you best know, but I believe in my true heart, and I tell it you

with God hearing me, that you were guilty either of killing her, or of screening the man who did do it. Now, go and talk about my father, Mr. Carlton."

It was only by dint of the most ingenious dodging that Frederick Grey had been able to accomplish his say, but Mr. Carlton caught him now. The cane came down on his shoulders; and Frederick, passion giving him the strength of a young lion, seized it and broke it in two. Mr. Carlton walked away, leaving a careless and scornful epithet behind him; and the boy leaned against the gate to recover breath and equanimity.

A tap on the shoulder, and Frederick turned. There stood Lady Jane Chesney. He raised his hat, and she could not help being struck with the nobility of the glowing countenance, the fearless truth of the large grey eyes.

"Frederick Grey, do you know that I have heard every syllable you said to Mr. Carlton? Surely you do not believe in your own accusation? It must have had its rise only in the heat of passion?"

"Lady Jane—I beg your pardon—I am sorry you heard this—I hope you do not think me capable of making such an accusation *not* believing it. I do believe it; I have believed it ever since that night. Not that I have what might be called reason for believing it," he hastily added. "It is only an instinct within me. I am sure Mr. Carlton knows in some way more about it than he will say. I think he must have been bribed by the man who did it."

"Do you remember that—although we are at variance and I do not like him—he is my brother-in-law?"

"Yes. I am very sorry that you heard what passed," he repeated. "Perhaps, Lady Jane, you will be kind enough to let it be as though you had not heard it?"

"I will," said Lady Jane. "And in return allow me to recommend you not to give utterance to sentiments so dangerous. My opinion is that you are totally wrong in your fancy, and that prejudice against Mr. Carlton has led you into the error. It is impossible to believe otherwise. Some men—I do not know that Mr. Carlton is one—would bring you before the law for this, and make you prove your words, or punish you if you could not do so. Be more discreet in future."

"Thank you," he answered, his sunny smile returning to him; "it is a bargain, Lady Jane. I was in a dreadful passion, there's no denying it, and I did say more than I ought to have said. Thank you very much."

And replacing his hat, for he had stood bareheaded during the interview, Frederick Grey vaulted away, flinging the pieces of cane from him as he ran. Lady Jane stood looking after him.

"A noble spirit, I'm sure," she murmured, "in spite of his hair-brained words. I wonder if Mr. Carlton will bring him to punishment for them. I should, were so unjustifiable an accusation made against me. Boys will be boys."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

AN OLD ENEMY.

So Stephen Grey could not struggle with the fate which seemed to be working against him, and he quitted his home of years, and betook himself to London. John Grey found a suitable partner in Mr. Charles Lycett, the brother of the curate of St. Mark's, who was seeking a practice for himself, and Frederick Grey remained with his uncle in South Wennock to pursue his medical studies.

Mr. John Grey's advice to his brother was this :—Establish yourself *well* wherever you settle down, whether in London or elsewhere. Spend money in doing so, and the probability is that you will have it returned to you with interest; but if you begin in a small way, it's ten chances to one if you ever get on. Stephen took the advice; and circumstances favoured him. At the very time of his removal to London, a physician died suddenly in Savile Row. Stephen Grey stepped in, secured the lease of the house at the cost of a trifling outlay, and the practice came flowing in almost without exertion or solicitation on his part. Then he took his doctor's degree; and in a few months after he had left South Wennock, he found he was gaining a much larger income than he and his brother had made together.

Nearly a twelvemonth had elapsed subsequent to the return of Lady Jane Chesney to South Wennock, and September was come round again. The past year had brought little that was eventful in its wake. An infant, born to Lady Laura Carlton, had died at its birth, and she was one of the gay South Wennock world again. Mr. Carlton's practice was a very good one now, for fresh people were ever coming to the new buildings springing up around South Wennock, and he was obliged to take an assistant. No further tilt at arms had occurred between him and Frederick Grey. He had, perhaps wisely, overlooked the boy's dangerous insolence; and since then they had passed each other in the street without speaking. Frederick Grey's dislike to Mr. Carlton was made a sort of joke of in the Grey family; none of them (save his mother, and she was away now) knew its origin: and South Wennock set the dislike down to Mr. Carlton's somewhat underhand conduct towards Stephen Grey.

Thus nearly a twelvemonth rolled on with but little to mark it.

On the state bed which Jane Chesney had lovingly chosen for her father when the newly-taken house was being furnished in Portland Place, lay Eliza, Countess of Oakburn, an infant cradled by her side. The old saying runs that "After a wedding comes a burying;" but it more frequently happens that after a wedding comes a christening. Buryings, however, do follow all too surely when their turn comes, and one was not far off that house now.

There had been as little that was eventful to mark during the past twelvemonth in the Earl of Oakburn's house, as there had been in South Wennock. Lady Oakburn had made him a good wife; she had been as solicitous for his comfort as Jane could have been. She made an excellent mistress of his household, a judicious and kind step-mother to Lucy, and the little girl had learnt to love her.

But all her anxious care had not been able to keep the earl's old enemy, gout, from him. He lay in the room above, suffering under an aggravated attack; an attack which threatened danger.

Two days only had the little fellow in the cradle by the countess's bed seen the light; he was the young heir. Lucy Chesney sat near, touching now and again the wonderful little red face as she talked to her step-mother.

"It is very good of you to let me come in, mamma. What shall his name be?" They were thinking of the christening, you see.

"Francis, of course, Lucy."

"But I have heard papa say that the heir should be John. It has been—oh, for ages, 'John, Earl of Oakburn.'"

"Papa shall decide, dear."

"We can't ask him to-day, he is so much worse. He——"

"Worse?" echoed the countess in startled tones, whilst an attendant, sitting in the room, raised her finger with a warning gesture.

Lucy coloured in contrition; she saw that she had said more than she ought.

"Nurse, you told me the earl was better this morning!"

The woman rose. "My lady, there was not much difference; he was better, if anything," she responded, endeavouring to put all sound of evasion from her voice. "My lord is in pain, and that's why Lady Lucy may call him worse; but it is in the nature of gout to be painful."

"Lucy, tell me the truth. I ask you in your father's name. I see that he is worse, and they are keeping it from me. How much worse?"

Lucy stood in distress, not knowing what to do; blaming herself for her incaution. The eyes of fear are quick, and Lady Oakburn saw her dilemma.

"Child," she continued, her emotion rising, "you remember the

day, three months ago, when your papa was thrown from his horse in the park, and they sent on here a vague account of the accident, so that we could not tell whether he was much or little hurt, whether he was alive or dead? Do you recollect that hour?—the dreadful suspense?—how we prayed to know the worst, rather than to be kept from it?"

"Oh, mamma," interrupted Lucy, placing her hand on her eyes, as if she would shut out some unwelcome sight, "do not talk of it. I never could bear to think of it, but that papa came home, after all, only a little bruised. That *was* suspense!"

"Lucy, dear child, you are keeping me in the same suspense now," spoke the countess. "I cannot bear it; I can bear certain evil, but not suspense. Now tell me the truth."

Lucy thought she saw her way plain before her; anything was better than suspense, now that fear had been alarmed.

"I will tell you all I know, mamma. Papa is worse, but I do not think he is so much worse as to cause uneasiness. I have often known him in as much pain as this, before—before"—Lucy in her delicacy of feeling scarcely knew how to word the phrase—"before you came here."

"Lucy, should your papa become worse, and danger arise, you will let me know. Mind! I rely upon you. No"—for Lucy was drawing away her hand—"you cannot go until you have promised."

"I do promise, mamma," was Lucy's honest answer. And Lady Oakburn gave a relieved sigh.

Of course the nurse had now to plot and plan to counteract this promise, and she sought out Miss Snow. For Miss Snow was in the house still, Lucy's governess. Lord Oakburn had not allowed his wife to take full charge of Lucy's education, so Miss Snow was retained; but the countess superintended all.

"My Lady Lucy must not be allowed to know that his lordship is in danger, ma'am," grumbled the nurse. "She comes tattling everything to my lady, and it won't do. A pretty thing to have *her* worried!" she concluded, indignantly.

"Is the earl in danger?" quickly asked Miss Snow.

"He's in awful pain, if that's danger," was the answer. "I'm not a sick nurse, ma'am; only a monthly: but if ever I saw gout in the stomach, he has it."

"Why, that is certain death," uttered Miss Snow in an accent of alarm.

"Oh no, it's not; not always. The worst sign, they say, is that all my lord's snappishness has gone out of him!"

"Who says so? Who says it has?"

"The attendants. That black fellow does nothing but stand behind the bed and cry and sob. He'd like his master to rave at

him as usual. But you'll keep things from Lady Lucy, please. I'll speak to the servants."

Miss Snow nodded, and the nurse, having warned the rest of the household, took her way back to Lady Oakburn's chamber.

The day closed; night drew on, and the earl's state was ominous. Agonies of pain, awful pain, lasted him throughout it: and but for the well-built walls and good floors, Lady Oakburn must have heard his groans.

With the morning he was calmer, easier; nevertheless, three physicians went in to him. The two in regular attendance had sent for another.

"The ship's sinking," said the earl to them. "No more splicing the timbers; they are rotten, and won't bear it."

The earl was right, and the doctors knew it; but they would not admit, in so many words, that he was dying. The earl, in his blunt way, blunt still, told them of their crafthood.

"It's all in your day's work to go about deceiving people," cried he; "telling them they are getting their sea-legs again, while all the time you know that before the next eight-bells strike they'll have gone down to Davy Jones's locker. It may be the right sort of steering for some patients, delicate women and children, perhaps, but it's not for me, and you are a long way out of your reckoning."

The earl's voice grew faint. They administered some drops in a glass, and wiped his brow.

"I am an old sailor, sirs," he continued, "and I have turned into my hammock night after night for the best part of my life, knowing there was only a plank between me and eternity. D'ye think, then, I have not *learnt* to face death—that you should be afraid to acknowledge it to me, now it's come? If I had not made up my accounts with my Maker before, there wouldn't be much time for it now. I have been headstrong and irritable, giving my tongue the reins, but the Great Commander knows that poor Jack Tar acquires that in his hard life at sea. He looks to the heart, and He is merciful to a slipped word or two. Pompey!"

The man came forward and threw himself by the bedside; his whole attidude expressing the keenest grief and affection.

"Pompey, tell them, though I have made you fly at my voice, whether I have been a bad master. What sort of master have I been?"

Poor Pompey! his sobs nearly choked him as he knelt and covered the earl's hand with his tears and kisses.

"Never a better massa! never a better massa! Pompey like to go with him."

"You'd keep it from me that my voyage is run, sirs! We seamen have a Saviour as well as you. He chose fishermen for His friends;

d'ye think, then, He'd reject a poor knocked-about sailor, who goes to Him hat in hand and lays his sins at His feet? No! He'll steer our boat through the last quicksands, and be on shore to receive us, as He once received His own fishermen, and had a fire of coals ready for them, and fish laid thereon, and bread. And that was after He had suffered! Never be backward again in telling a tired sailor that he's nearing port. Shall I last the day out?"

More than that, they thought.

"One of you will send a despatch for my daughter, and—I suppose my wife cannot come to me."

Lady Oakburn's medical attendant was in the room, one of those round the earl, and he pronounced it "Impossible." Neither must her ladyship be suffered to know of the danger, he added. For a day or two at all events it must be kept from her, or he would not answer for the consequences. The young Lady Lucy must not be allowed to learn it, or she would carry the tidings to her.

The earl listened, and nodded his head. "Very good," he said. And he dictated a message to his daughter Jane.

As the medical men went out they encountered Lucy. She was sitting on the stairs waiting for them, deeply anxious. Summoning the third doctor had caused commotion in the house, and Lucy did not know what to think. Gliding up to the one who attended Lady Oakburn, whom she knew best, she eagerly questioned him. But Dr. James, upon his guard, told Lucy the pain had left her papa, and she might go in for a minute to see him.

The delighted child went in. The earl stroked her head and kissed her; told her to take a kiss to mamma and to the "young blue-jacket," and to say that his voyage was going on to a prosperous ending. Then, mindful of what the medical men had said about its being kept from his wife, or it might cost her her life, and afraid of a chance word on his own part, he dismissed the child, telling her he was to remain very quiet all day. Lucy flew to the countess's chamber, encountering the angry nurse at the door, who looked ready for a pitched battle.

"It's quite impossible that you can enter, my lady."

Lucy pleaded. And the nurse found that the child had only come to bring *glad* news, and to talk of the little "blue-jacket;" so she allowed her to go in.

And when Dr. James came to pay his morning visit to the countess, his answers to her inquiries were full of reassurance, calculated to give ease to her mind. No idea did they impart that the earl was dying; indeed, Lady Oakburn rather gathered from them that he might be taking a renewed lease of life.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

GOING OUT WITH THE TIDE.

LADY JANE CHESNEY was seated at breakfast in her house, at South Wennock, when a man on horseback, wearing the uniform of the telegraph office at Great Wennock, came galloping up to the gate. Jane saw him hand in a despatch, and her heart fluttered strangely. Imagination took a wide range and settled upon Clarice. When Judith entered she saw that her mistress's very lips were white.

"I'm afraid to open it, Judith," spoke poor Jane, as the girl held it out to her. "It may bring bad news."

"Nay, my lady, I should hope the contrary," was Judith's answer. "It's known there was a young heir expected: perhaps this is to tell that he is born."

The colour came into Jane's face again. Of course it was nothing else! How could she have been so forgetful? No; no chance of its being from the unhappy Clarice: *she* seemed lost for good. With fingers that burned—burned at the thought of who the young heir's mother was, and who she had been—Jane Chesney tore open the despatch.

"*London. Eight thirty, a.m.*

"RICHARD JAMES, M.D., TO THE LADY JANE CHESNEY.

"The Earl of Oakburn is dangerously ill: come at once, if you would see him alive. He says bring Lady Laura."

The despatch fell from her hand, and she burst into tears. All her old affection for her father had returned in that one moment.

What was to be thought of first? Lady Jane took a minute for reflection, and then her plans were formed. She wrote a line in pencil to Laura, explaining the matter, and telling her she would call for her in a fly. The servant was to leave the note at Mr. Carlton's, and then go on to the Red Lion, order the fly, and come back in it. Meanwhile, Lady Jane and Judith prepared themselves, and were ready when the fly arrived. Jane got into it, and drove to her sister's. Mr. Carlton came forth. Jane bowed coldly, but vouchsafed to him no other greeting.

"Is Lady Laura not ready?" she asked.

"Laura is absent," he replied. "The twisted note you sent was not sealed, and I opened it. She has gone to spend a few days at Pembury with Colonel and Mrs. Marden."

Jane was rather nonplused for a moment. "This opportunity for a reconciliation with the earl should not be lost," she resumed at length. "Lady Laura must be telegraphed to." *Lady* Laura! Not to him, though he was the husband, would she speak the simple name. "I will telegraph to her myself as I pass Great Wennock Station," continued Jane, as she signalled to drive on. "Good morning."

"Thank you," returned Mr. Carlton; "if you will take the trouble. Good morning, Lady Jane. I sincerely hope you will find the earl better on your arrival."

A hasty journey to the station; a hasty telegraphic message, despatched to Lady Laura Carlton at Colonel Marden's; and Lady Jane and Judith were seated in an express train, whirling away towards London.

They reached Portland Place early in the afternoon. A change for the worse had taken place in the earl; he was rapidly sinking. Lady Jane was shown immediately to his chamber. She remembered the large handsome bedroom which had been his, and was turning to it of her own accord.

"Not there, my lady," whispered the servant; "higher up."

"*Higher up?*" repeated Jane, with displeased emphasis.

"The countess is lying in that room. My lord is upstairs."

Jane resented the news in her heart. *He* to be put out of his room for a Miss Lethwait! The words seemed to imply that she was ill, but Jane would not inquire. In the corridor, Lucy (who in spite of Miss Snow's watchfulness had not been quite cured of her propensity for looking over balustrades) flew down to her, in delight and surprise.

"Oh, Jane!" she uttered, clinging round her neck, "is it really you? How came you to come?"

Miss Snow would have found fault with the wording of the sentence. Jane only clasped her sister.

"I have come to see papa, Lucy. Is there no hope?"

"No hope!" echoed the child, staring at her sister. "Why, Jane, what made you think that? He is as much better as he can be. He is nearly well. The pain is almost gone: and you know he always got well as soon as the pain left him."

Jane was staggered. The message had been ominous; the servant, now showing her up, had just told her there was no hope; what, then, did Lucy mean? But Dr. James was standing beside them, having emerged from the earl's room. He heard Lucy's words and saw Jane's perplexed countenance. He hastened to interfere, willing to prevent any imprudent explanation.

"Lady Jane Chesney, I presume. But—allow me a moment, Lady Lucy: this is against orders. You were not to come to this corridor at all to-day: the earl must not be disturbed."

"Oh, Dr. James! I was obliged just to come when I saw my sister. But I'll go back to Miss Snow now. Jane, you will come into the study when you have seen papa?"

Jane promised.

"Oh, and Jane, there's a new baby. Do you know it? He is such a darling little fellow, and papa calls him 'young blue-jacket.' He is three days old."

"Is there?" responded Jane, and Lucy went back again. Jane turned inquiringly to the physician.

"The earl, I grieve to say, is sinking," he whispered. "We keep the fact from the child that it may not reach the ears of the countess; she would immediately go and tell her."

"Is it right to keep it from the countess?" asked Jane, her tone as she put the question, betraying that she thought it was wrong.

Dr. James raised his physicianly hands and eyes.

"Right to keep it from her, Lady Jane! I would not for the world allow it to reach her ladyship in her present state of health; we don't know what the consequences might be. My reputation is at stake, madam."

Jane bowed her head, and entered her father's room. The earl lay with his eyes closed, breathing heavily. Death was on his face: Jane saw that at a glance. The slight movement she made caused him to open them: a joyful ray of gladness flashed into his countenance, and he feebly put out his hand. Jane sank on her knees, and burst into a flood of tears as she clasped it.

"Oh, father, father!"

Who can tell how bitter was that moment to Jane Chesney? In spite of the marriage and the new wife, in spite of the estrangement and the separation, she had unconsciously cherished a secret hope, unacknowledged openly to herself, but not the less dear to her heart, that she and her father should come together again; that she should still be his dear daughter, living in the sunshine of his presence, ministering to his comfort as of old. How it was to be brought about, she never glanced at; but the hope, the prospect, had not been less indulged. And now—there he lay, only a few hours of life left to him! Had Jane's heart not broken before, it would have broken then.

> The day drags through, though storms keep out the sun,
> And thus the heart will break, but brokenly live on.

Her head was bowed over him, and she allowed a few moments for the indulgence of her anguish. Her bonnet was off, and Lord Oakburn stretched over his other hand, and laid it fondly on her hair.

"Don't fret, Jane. We must all make the port at last."

"Oh, father, father!" she repeated in agony. "Is there no hope?"

"Not in this ship, Jane. But I'm going into a better. One not

made with human hands, child; one where the pumps don't get choked or the timbers rotten. My voyage is nearly over, Jane."

She sobbed piteously; she scarcely knew how to bear the hour's trial.

"Father, are we to part *thus*, having been estranged all this while? Oh, father, forgive me for my rebellion; forgive me for all the grief I may have caused you; but I could not endure to be nothing to you, a cipher in your home."

"Child, what do you mean? You have not been rebellious to me; you must go to Laura for that. It did hurt you, Jane, I know, and I was vexed when I had done it; but you see, child, I wanted to have a direct heir, and now he is born. Forgive *me*, Jane, for the pain I caused you, but don't you ask forgiveness of me; you, my dutiful child, who have ever been ready to place your hands under my feet. I might have set about it in a more ship-shape manner, have taken you into my counsels, and made it pleasant for all sides; and I wish I had. You see, I thought you wouldn't like it, and I was a coward for once, and did not speak. She has been a good wife to me, Jane; and she respects you, and would love you, if you'd let her."

Jane did not answer. An attendant opened the door to see if anything might be wanted, but was waved away again.

"So Laura would not come, Jane?"

"She could not come," sobbed Jane. "She was at Pembury. She has been telegraphed for, and may be here by the next train."

"Does he make her a good husband?"

"I think so; I hear nothing to the contrary. I do not go there," added Jane, trying to subdue her aching heart, so as to speak calmly.

"And now, Jane, where's Clarice? In this, my death-hour, she is more anxiously present to me than any of you. Has harm come to her?"

"Father, I don't know where she is: I cannot think or imagine where. I begin to fear that harm has come to her. Sometimes I feel sure of it."

"In what shape?" asked the earl.

"Nay, how can I tell? Then, again, I reason that she may be abroad: but the thought of her has become to me a ceaseless care."

"However it may be, I can do nothing," panted the peer. "But, Jane, I leave her to you. Mind! *I leave her to you!* Spare no exertions to discover her; make it your object in life, until it is accomplished; keep that port always in view in your steering. And when you have found her give her my blessing, and tell her I have not been able to leave her well-off, but that I have done what I could. You will give her a home, Jane, if she will not come to her step-mother?"

"As long as I have one, father."

"Yours is secured, such as it is. Lucy——"

The earl's voice had been growing weaker, and now ceased altogether. Jane opened the door, and beckoned in the attendants, whom she found waiting outside.

"Oh, missee! oh, missee!" wept poor Pompey, pressing forward. "Massa never get up no more!"

The earl appeared to have sunk into a stupor; but they could scarcely tell whether it was stupor or sleep. When the medical men paid their next visit, they said he might go off in it, or might rally for a time. Jane sat in the room; she could not leave him. And thus the day passed on.

Passed on without bringing Laura. Jane wondered much. *Would* she not come—as the earl had fancied? She listened intently, her ear alive to every sound.

The medical men came in and out, but the dying man still lay as he was, and gave no token. Once more Jane urged upon them the claims of the countess—that she ought to be apprized of the danger; but they positively refused to listen to her. It grew dark, and the nurse brought in the night-lamp. Jane was watching her arrange it, watching her mechanically, when a voice was heard from the bed.

"Jane."

It was her father's; he had roused up to consciousness; it almost seemed to strength, for the voice was firm, and the sight and sense seemed clear. Jane put a spoonful of jelly within his lips.

"Jane, I think I have seen the country on the other side. It's better than Canaan was, and the rivers are like crystal, and the flowers on the banks are bright. I am nearly there, Jane; just one narrow strait to work through first, which looks dark; but the darkness is nothing, for I can see the light beyond."

Jane's tears fell. She could not trust her voice to answer: and the earl was silent for a time.

"Such a great big ship, Jane," he began again; "big enough to hold all the people in the world; and those who get into her are at rest for ever. No more cold watches to keep on dark nights: no more shifting sails; no more tacking and wearing; no more struggles with storm and hurricane; the Great Commander does it all for us. You'll come to me there, Jane? I am only going on a little while first."

"Yes," Jane softly whispered through her sobs, "to be together for ever and ever."

"Where's Clarice?" he suddenly exclaimed. "Has she not come!"

Jane had little doubt that he meant Laura. "We did not expect Clarice," she said. "And Laura is not here yet."

"Jane, perhaps Clarice has gone into the beautiful ship before me. I may find her there."

"I don't know," Jane faintly answered, feeling how worse than unsatisfactory was the uncertainty respecting Clarice in that dying hour. "Father, if—if Laura cannot be here in time, you will leave her your forgiveness?"

"It is left to her. You may give it to her again; my love and my full forgiveness. But she might have come for it. Perhaps he would not let her come, Jane."

"You forget," she murmured; "Laura was not at home, and Mr. Carlton could not prevent her. Why should he wish to do so? I do not think he would."

"Tell Laura I forgive him, too; and I hope he may get into the ship with the rest of us. But, Jane, I cannot like him; I never did like him. When Laura finds herself upon the quicksands, do you shelter her; she'll have no one else to do it."

Was that sentence spoken with the strange prevision that sometimes attends the dying? Perhaps so!

A slight sound upon the muffled knocker. Jane's quick ear caught it. She hoped it was Laura, but it was only Dr. James. He came into the earl's room, and then went down to pay a visit to the countess.

After his departure Lord Oakburn again sank into what seemed a stupor, and lay so for an hour or two. As ten o'clock struck he started from it.

"Eliza, what's the time?"

Jane glanced at his watch, which was hanging up, for she had not noticed the striking of the house clock.

"Five minutes past ten."

"Oh, it's you, Jane," he said, with a sort of gladness that it *was* her, which found its echo in Jane's heart; and he feebly put out his hand in search of hers. "My own Jane! with me at the last! She doesn't know how I have missed her."

The last sentence appeared to be spoken as if he were oblivious of her presence, in that absence of memory which frequently accompanies the dying: and there was a second glad echo within her heart.

"I am not in there yet, Jane, and the passage seems long. But there the ship is—what a sight! with her spars and her white sails. They are silvered over; and the spars are as glass, and the ship herself is gold. But it seems long to wait! How's the tide?"

His voice had grown so indistinct that Jane had to bend down to listen, but the last question was spoken in a clear, anxious tone. She gave some soothing answer, not supposing that he meant the actual tide—the matter-of-fact "high water at London Bridge"—of the living, moving earth.

"The tide, Jane, the tide?" he continued, pointing with his finger to his own nautical almanac, which lay on his dressing-table. Jane rose and reached the book,

"The tide is coming in, father," she said, after finding the place. "It will be high-water at eleven o'clock."

"Ay, ay. That's what I'm waiting for. I couldn't go against the tide, Jane; it must turn. I shall go out with the tide."

Jane put back the book, and resumed her post beside him.

"Give my love to my wife, Jane, and tell her I wish I could have seen her; but the doctors wouldn't let it be so. And, Jane, you'll love my little son?"

"Oh yes," she answered, with a sobbing sigh.

"And you'll come here sometimes when I'm gone? You'll come to see Lucy."

"Oh, father!" uttered Jane, in a tone of startled pain, "you surely have not left her away from me?"

The earl half opened his eyes. "What?"

"You have not left the guardianship of Lucy to any one but *me?*" breathlessly continued Jane. "Father, I have brought her up from her cradle; I have been to her as a second mother; you could not leave her away from me?"

He was evidently troubled, insensible as he had nearly become to earthly things.

"I did not think of it, Jane; when I made my will, I did not think——" his voice sank and Jane could not catch it. Silence fell upon the room, broken only by a convulsive sound that arose now and then: the sobs of Jane.

"It's getting dark," he resumed, later; "come closer to me, Jane. Don't you see the ship? She's lying at anchor while she waits. Look at her, Jane; how bright she is; never mind it's being dark here. The banks are green, and the flowers brilliant, and the clouds are rose colour. And there's the Captain! He is there! Oh, Jane, shut your eyes, you cannot look upon His brightness. He is beckoning—beckoning to me!" reiterated the earl, his earnest voice so full of strange, loving triumph, that to Jane's mind it was impossible to connect what he said with a mere worldly vision. "I told you He would not reject a poor weather-beaten sailor. He will guide the ship to God—right into the blessed port of heaven. Yes, yes, I am coming; never mind the darkness; we shall soon be in the light."

He said no more, but lay quietly. The tide turned at eleven o'clock, and the spirit of Francis, thirteenth Earl of Oakburn, went out with it.

One of the servants left the room to make known the event to the household, and in the same moment Lady Laura Carlton, so anxiously

looked for, arrived. It turned out that when the despatch reached Colonel Marden's, she and the family had just departed on a day's excursion to some distant ruins. It was given to her when she returned home, but that was not until five in the evening. She had lost no time in coming then.

Laura was of an impetuous nature, and the instant the door was opened to her she ran upstairs, trusting to instinct to find her father's bedroom. In the corridor of the first floor, close to the countess's chamber, she encountered the servant who had just left the room above. "How is the earl?" she then inquired.

The servant stared at her. Perhaps the woman did not know that another daughter was expected. She made no answer for a moment, and Laura stamped her foot impatiently.

"I ask you how Lord Oakburn is! Don't you know me? I am Lady Laura Carlton."

"The earl is dead, my lady," replied the woman in a low voice. "The breath has just left his body."

"Dead!" shrieked Laura, in tones that might be heard in every part of the house. "My father dead! Oh, Jane, is it true?" she wailed, catching sight of Jane Chesney on the landing above. "Jane, Jane, is papa dead?"

Out came the nurse from Lady Oakburn's room, her face white as a sheet and as sour as vinegar, praying for caution and silence. Laura went on, and Jane took her into the death-chamber.

She flung herself down by the side of the bed, crying frantically, almost raving. Why had she not been sent for earlier? why had they allowed him to die without her seeing him? Jane, in her quiet, but far deeper grief, strove to soothe her; she whispered of his peaceful frame of mind, of his loving message of forgiveness; but Laura sobbed on hysterically, and would not be comforted.

A sight startled them both. A tall figure, robed in a flannel dressing-gown, with an ashen face, came gliding in and stood gazing at the corpse. Laura had never seen her before, and the sight hushed her to silence; Jane knew her for Lady Oakburn. The nurse followed behind, wringing her hands, and audibly lamenting what it appeared she had no power to prevent. Laura's cry in the corridor had penetrated to the chamber, and Lady Oakburn rose from her bed.

Anguish and reproach struggled in her countenance; anguish at her husband's death, reproach at those who had kept his state from her; but she had powerful command over her feelings, and retained almost unnatural calmness. Seeing Jane, she turned and confronted her.

"Was this well done, Lady Jane?"

"I do not know precisely to what you allude," was Jane's answer.

"I am a stranger in the house, holding no authority in it, and whether things are ill or well done, it is not I who am responsible. I would have saved my father's life with my own, had it been possible so to save it."

"You have been here with him?"

"Since this afternoon."

"And yet you have excluded me!" returned Lady Oakburn, her voice trembling with suppressed emotion. "You think it right to exclude a wife from her husband's death-bed?"

"I think it very wrong," said Lady Jane. "I think nothing can justify it, except peril to her own life. The first caution I had breathed into my ear upon entering this house was, that the truth of my father's state, his danger, must be kept from you. I ventured to remonstrate; yes, I did: once to Dr. James alone, again to the medical men in concert. I was told that it was essential you should be kept in ignorance; that the tidings, if imparted, might have the worst effect upon you. I should have been the first to tell you, had I dared."

Lady Oakburn turned her condemning eyes to the nurse. "It was Dr. James," spoke up the woman. "He gave his orders throughout the household, and we could but obey him. He was afraid of such a thing as this, that has now happened: and who's to know, my lady, that you may not die for it?"

"I beg your pardon," murmured the countess to Jane. "Oh, Lady Jane, let us be friends in this awful moment!" she implored, an irresistible impulse prompting her to speak. "He was your father; my husband; and he is lying dead before us; he has entered into a world where strife must cease; forgive me for the injury you think I did you, for the estrangement that I unhappily caused you. Let us at least be friends in the present hour, though the future should bring coolness again!"

Jane Chesney put her hand into her step-mother's. "It was not my fault that you were not with him; had it rested with me, you should have been here. He charged me to give you his love, and to say how he wished he could have seen you, but that the doctors forbade it. His death has been very peaceful; full of hope of a better world; a little while, he said, and we should all join him there."

Lady Oakburn, Jane's hand still in hers, had laid her face upon the pillow by the dead, when a storm of suffocating sobs was heard behind them. Lucy, likewise aroused by Laura's cry on the stairs, had stolen in, in her night-dress.

"You kept it from me too, Lucy!" exclaimed Lady Oakburn in a tone of sad reproach. "And I *trusted* to you!"

"It was kept from her," spoke up the nurse. "We were afraid

of the child's knowing it, my lady, because she would have carried the news to you."

"Oh, Jane," sobbed the little girl, "why has your love gone from us? You knew he was dying, and you never told me! you need not have begrudged a kiss to me from him for the last time."

"I have no longer authority in the house, Lucy," repeated Jane, "and can only do as I am told. I am a stranger in it."

Her tone, broken by suffering, by sorrow, by a sound of *injury*, struck upon all, even amidst their own grief.

Laura had been kneeling in shadow since Lady Oakburn's entrance; had neither spoken to her, nor been seen by Lucy. Jane turned to her now.

"And he left you his forgiveness, Laura; his full and free forgiveness, and his blessing," she said, as her silent tears fell. "He died leaving his forgiveness to Mr. Carlton; his good wishes for him. Oh, but that I know my father has gone to peace, to heavenly happiness, this trial would be greater than I could bear!"

The last words appeared to escape her in her excess of anguish. It was indeed a night of bitter trial for all; but for none perhaps as it was for Jane.

Still, in spite of her grief, she was obliged to forego a great part of her prejudice against Lady Oakburn. It was certainly not a time to retain ill-feeling; and Jane could not close her eyes to the fact that Lady Oakburn had been a good woman in her new home. If Jane could only forgive the marriage, the countess's conduct in all her new duties had been admirable. And as she sobbed that night by Jane's side, and reiterated over and over again her grief, her *remorse* for the estrangement between the earl and his daughter, her humble prayer that Lady Jane would at least *try* to learn to look upon her as not an enemy, Jane's heart insensibly warmed, and she unconsciously began to like the countess better than ever she had liked her as Miss Lethwait.

"If I have been wrong in my prejudice, more obstinate than I ought to have been, if it brought pain to my dear father, may God forgive me!" she murmured. "Yes, Lady Oakburn, we will be friends henceforth; good friends, I trust; never more enemies."

And Lady Oakburn took Jane's hand and sobbed over it. The trouble she had brought upon Lady Jane, the estrangement caused by her between Jane and her father, had been the one thorn in the countess's wedded life.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE NEXT DAY.

On the morning following the death, Judith went abroad to make certain purchases for her mistress, and in passing along Piccadilly she encountered Stephen Grey—now Dr. Grey, as you have heard. The two stopped, mutually surprised and delighted. It is pleasant to meet an old face from one's native place, no matter what the social degree.

"Why, Judith," he exclaimed, "is it you or your ghost? What wind blew you to town?"

He put out his hand to shake hands with her: he was the same Stephen Grey as ever, free and cordial. Judith's face glowed with pleasure. If there was one person in all South Wennock who believed in Mr. Stephen Grey's innocence, and that he was an ill-used man, it was Judith Ford.

"Lady Jane was telegraphed for yesterday, sir," she explained. "The earl was dying. We reached London in the afternoon, and he died a few minutes past eleven at night."

"I heard of his death this morning. Gout, I suppose?"

"Gout in the stomach, I believe, sir," replied Judith. "But he suffered as good as nothing yesterday, and died peacefully as a child."

"He would not suffer much towards the last," remarked the doctor. "And the young earl is a strapping shaver of four days old! Death and birth, Judith; the one comes to replace the other."

"It's in the course of nature that it should be so, sir," was Judith's answer. "But as to the baby being strapping, I don't know about that, for I have not seen him. It's born healthy and straight, the servants say, and that's the chief thing. Lady Laura is up in Portland Place also," she added, "but she did not get there in time to see her father alive."

"How was that—if Lady Jane could do so?"

"Lady Laura was visiting at Pembury. My lady sent a note to her, thinking she was at home, and we called for her in the fly as we were going to the station. Mr. Carlton came out to Lady Jane. I don't fancy she much liked meeting him; she has never once met him face to face, sir, until yesterday, since the marriage."

"How is Carlton getting on?" asked the doctor. "Well, I hear."

"Very well, I believe," answered Judith. "But Mr. Grey and his partner, Mr. Lycett, have as much as ever they can do. There's plenty of practice for all, sir."

"I always said so," replied the doctor. "Do Carlton and Frederick fall out still?" And he laughed as he asked the question.

"Not that I hear of, sir. I fancy they keep apart, for there's no love lost between them. He gets very good-looking, does Master Frederick. The last time I saw him he said he should soon be leaving for London."

"Very soon now. But we thought it better he should remain for a time at South Wennock, where he sees more of the drudgery of the profession than he would with me."

"And, sir, if I may make bold to ask it, how are you prospering?"

"Famously, Judith. Short as the time is that I have been here, I am making a great deal more than I did at South Wennock. So if your friend, Carlton, thought to ruin me by driving me away, he has not succeeded in his wish."

The doctor spoke in light, pleasant tones. He cherished enmity to none, not even to Mr. Carlton; to do so was not in his nature. But Judith resented the words.

"Mr. Carlton is no friend of mine, sir; I don't like him well enough for that. When shall you be paying a visit to South Wennock, Mr. Stephen?"

"My goodness, Judith! The idea of your calling me 'Mr. Stephen!'" returned the jesting doctor. "I'm a great man now, and shall enter an action against you for loss of title. Don't you know that I am the famous Dr. Grey?"

Judith smiled. His merriment was contagious. "But when shall you be coming, sir?"

"Perhaps never," he replied, a shade of seriousness rising to his face. "South Wennock did not treat me so well that I should wish to see it again speedily. Should the mystery ever be cleared up about that draught—and, mark you, Judith, when it is cleared up, it will be found that I was innocent—then I may visit it again."

Judith fell into momentary thought, wondering whether the mystery ever would be cleared up. She hoped it would be sometime; and yet—she dreaded that that time should come.

"You will look in upon us, won't you, Judith, now you are in town? Mrs. Stephen Grey will be glad to see an old face."

"Thank you, sir," replied Judith, much gratified by the invitation. "I shall be glad to pay my duty to Mrs. Grey. Does London agree with her, sir?"

"I'm afraid it does not, Judith, very well. But neither did South Wennock. She is always delicate, you know, let her be where she will. Ah, Judith, if we could only find some spot in this lower world, warranted to give health to all invalids, what a thing it would be! As great a boon as the mill we are always looking for that grinds folk young again."

He was turning away laughing. Judith stopped him.

"I beg your pardon, sir, but I do not know your address."

"Bless me, don't you! I thought all the world knew where the great Dr. Grey lived," he returned jestingly. "There it is"—giving her his card—"Savile Row; and mind you find your way to it."

Curious to say, that accidental interview, that simple card given to Judith, led to an event quite unlooked for.

When Judith reached home—that is, her home for the time being, Portland Place—she found the house in commotion, although it was the house of the dead. Lady Oakburn had dismissed her medical attendant, Dr. James.

She had done it, as she did most things, in a quiet, lady-like manner, but one absolutely firm and uncompromising. Dr. James had by stratagem, *by untruth*, prevented a last interview between herself and her husband, and she felt that she could not regard him again with feelings unallied to vexation and anger. It was better therefore that they should part. Dr. James urged that what he had done, he had done for the best, out of concern for her ladyship's welfare. That, her ladyship did not doubt, she answered; but she could not forget or forgive the way in which it had been accomplished. In her judgment, Dr James should have imparted to her the truth of her husband's state, and *then* urged prudence upon her. It was the deceit she could not forgive, or—in short—countenance.

The result was the dismissal of Dr. James, and the dismay of the nurse in attendance upon the countess. The dismay extended itself to Lady Jane. Although the imprudence of Lady Oakburn on the previous night appeared not to have materially affected her, still she was not yet in a sufficiently convalescent state to be left without a medical attendant. Lady Oakburn appeared to think she was so. She was not personally acquainted with any other doctor in London, she said to Jane, and seemed to dislike the idea of a stranger's being called in to her of whose ways and skill she could know nothing. It was in this dilemma that Judith found the house on her return.

"Oh, my lady," she exclaimed to her mistress on the spur of the moment, "if the countess would only call in Mr. Stephen Grey! He is so safe! so skilful! and she could not fail to like him."

She extended the card as she spoke, and mentioned the recent interview. Jane listened, and carried the card to the countess.

"Let me send for him, Lady Oakburn," she urged. "I do think it is necessary that you should have some one; and, as Judith says, you could not fail to like Dr. Grey."

Lady Oakburn consented. Known well to Judith, partially known to Lady Jane, he would not seem quite a stranger: and Stephen Grey was sent for. It was the first step in the friendship that ensued between the Greys and Lady Oakburn: a friendship that was destined to bring great events in its train.

It was a somewhat singular coincidence that the Dowager Countess of Oakburn should die the day after the earl. Such was the fact, however. She had been ill for several weeks. No immediate danger was apprehended, but in the very hour that she heard news of the earl's death—the tidings of which were conveyed to her in the morning—she was taken suddenly worse, and expired at three o'clock in the afternoon. Lady Jane went to her house at Kensington and was in time to see her alive, but she had then lost consciousness, and was speechless. One of the old countess's granddaughters said—it was a dreadfully irreverent thing to say—that they must have gone together to plague each other on the journey, just as they had plagued each other in life.

It was decided that the two funerals should take place at the same time and place in one of the great London cemeteries. The burial-place of the Earls of Oakburn was Chesney Oaks; but he, the old sailor just gone, had expressly desired that no parade and no expense, beyond what was absolutely necessary, should be wasted upon him. To convey him to Chesney Oaks would involve considerable outlay; his poor worthless body would not rest any the better for it, he quaintly said; let it be put into the ground in the simplest manner possible, and in the nearest cemetery. The executors of the dowager countess thought it well to observe the same simplicity with regard to her, and it was arranged that they should be interred together.

Jane and Laura remained in town until the funeral should be over. They would not quit the house while their father lay dead in it; and in the reconciliation with his widow, there was no necessity for hurrying away. Laura, impetuous in all her doings, took a violent fancy to the countess, protesting secretly to Jane that she was a far superior woman to what she had imagined; and it would be a convenient house to put up at, she candidly added, when she chose to visit London. Jane was not swayed by any motives so interested; but she could not help acknowledging to herself that the countess won upon her regard day by day.

"She has done her duty by Lucy," Miss Snow remarked to Lady Jane confidentially. "Never a mother was more anxious for a child's welfare than Lady Oakburn is for Lucy's. I made my mind up at first not to remain; but when I found how good she was, how she tried to do her utmost for us all in loving-kindness, I thought I should be foolish to leave. She would not have kept me, though, but for the earl; she told me she should wish to take the child's education entirely into her own hands, but he would not suffer it. I dare say she will take it now."

They were busy over their mourning. Jane ordered hers quiet and good, befitting a lady, but plain; Laura chose hers for its

magnificence. Jane ventured to caution her about expense, and Laura tossed her head in answer.

"Papa is sure to have remembered me," she said, "and surely I may spend what is my own." And she actually appealed to the countess—was it not certain that the earl had remembered her in his will?

It was a curious question, and perhaps the very fact of its being asked proved that Laura was not quite so sure upon the point as she wished to be. Lady Oakburn, however, could tell her nothing. She did not know how the earl had left his affairs. That he had made a recent will, she believed; for in the prospect of a little child being born, he had remarked to her that he must settle his affairs in accordance with that prospect, and she thought he had done so; but she did not know any details, for the earl had not mentioned them to her.

Oh, it was sure to be all right, Laura remarked with her usual unconcern; and she bought every pretty black dress that attracted her eye.

"You will be godmother to the little baby, Lady Jane, when the time comes for christening him?" supplicated the countess with sensible hesitation. "He shall belong as much to you as to me."

"Yes, willingly," replied Jane. *She* did not hesitate. That little frail being in its sheltering cradle seemed to be the one link to life left by her father.

"And—if I may express a wish—will you not call him Francis?"

"Francis, certainly; Francis always. The Earls of Oakburn have mostly been John—but I don't know that it need be a rule for us. We can name him Francis John: but he must be called Francis."

On one of the days that intervened between the death and the burial, Jane borrowed the countess's carriage—her own but one short year before—and went to Gloucester Terrace. Though feeling a conviction that Mrs. West would have sent to her had she heard news of Clarice, it did not seem right to Jane's anxious mind that she should leave London again without personally inquiring about her. But when she reached the house she received a disappointment. Mrs. West and her children, she was told, were at the seaside.

As Jane stood in the doorway in hesitation—as is the manner of many when they meet with an unexpected check—a gentleman put his head out at one of the sitting-rooms, wondering perhaps who the visitor might be, and what the colloquy was about. He was a pleasant-looking man, short and stout, with a red face and bristling hair.

"It's a good six weeks before my mistress will be at home, ma'am," the servant was saying. "She only went ten days ago,

and—— But here's my master," she broke off as the gentleman came forward. "Perhaps he can tell more for certain than I can."

Mr. West advanced to Lady Jane. His wife, Mrs. West, was out of town, he observed. Could he answer any questions for her, or convey to her any message?—he should be joining her at Ramsgate on the morrow.

Jane stepped into the sitting-room. He would probably know as much as his wife, was the reflection that crossed her mind. She mentioned the errand that she had come upon, and that she had been there some fifteen months before on the same.

"Oh yes, yes," said Mr. West. "I remember my wife spoke of the circumstance to me—Lady Jane Chesney, I presume," he added with a bow. "I am sorry to say that we have never heard anything of Miss Beauchamp. Only a short time before my wife left home for Ramsgate, she was talking of Miss Beauchamp, and wondering whether her friends had found her."

Jane sighed heavily, although she had expected nothing else than disappointment. "No," she said in a low tone, "we have not found her; we have not heard of her."

"It is very extraordinary," exclaimed Mr. West.

"It is more than that," said Jane, "it is alarming. Until lately we cherished the hope that she had gone abroad with some family, but every month that glides on seems to set the hope more and more at nought. Thank you," she added, moving to the door, and handing him a card. "That is my address in the country, where I reside. Should Mrs. West ever hear of her—though indeed the suggestion sounds a forlorn one—perhaps she will kindly forward me word of it there."

"I am sure you may rely upon her doing so," returned Mr. West. "And I only wish I had been able to give your ladyship better news now," he heartily concluded.

Attending her, he stood on the pavement while she stepped into the carriage, and was driven away. Jane sat in it strangely disheartened, considering that she had expected no better. A conviction had latterly been gaining upon her that Clarice was dead, and she seemed only to be able to think of her as being so.

But now there was one little item of news regarding Miss Beauchamp that Mrs. West had learnt since she last saw Lady Jane, and which she would certainly have imparted to her had she been at home, though she had not deemed it of sufficient importance to write to her; and perhaps had also abstained from doing so lest she might make mischief. Mr. West knew it, but he never supposed that it was not known to Lady Jane. After all, it was not much; and would have left the affair in mystery at least equal to that which at present enshrouded it.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

AN IMPROMPTU VISIT.

Lady Oakburn sat in her chamber, in an easy-chair by the fire. She sat up for several hours a day now, although the nurse with her old-fashioned ideas protested it was "too soon." Only Laura was with her, and she, Laura, held the little baby on her lap. Quite a mark of condescension for Laura, who was not fond of bringing herself into contact with things so troublesome as babies.

"I wish my own had lived," she was saying to Lady Oakburn. "It was the sweetest little girl ever seen. But I should not have nursed it, you know; I could not have subjected myself to the tie. I cannot think how you can have undertaken such a task!—you'll never be able to go out."

Lady Oakburn smiled. She and Laura were very different women. "How long did your child live?" she inquired.

"Only a day and a half. Mr. Carlton saw from the first that it would not live; but he did not tell me, and I wondered why he had it baptized so quickly. When he asked me what the name should be, and said Mr. Lycett was downstairs and would baptize it, I inquired why he wanted it done, and he said carelessly it was as well, when infants were delicate. I thought nothing of the answer then, but he has told me since!"

"What did you name it?"

"Laura. Mr. Carlton wished it, and I like the name very well. What *is* Jane sitting in that strange way for? Like a statue!"

For Jane Chesney had now returned from her visit to Mrs. West, had made her way wearily up the stairs to the countess's bedroom, and sunk down on a chair near the door. Disappointment was pressing heavily on her heart. As Laura turned to her in her wonder, Jane rose and came forward.

"I have had so fruitless a journey," she said. "Mrs. West, the lady I went to call upon, was at Ramsgate, but I saw her husband. They have heard nothing whatever of Clarice. I am sure she will never be found now."

"I should turn the world topsy-turvy but I'd find her," cried impetuous Laura. "She *can't* be lost, you know! Such a thing could not happen in these days."

Jane shook her head in silence. All the places she and her father could think of had been turned "topsy-turvy" in one sense, in the past days: but they had not found Clarice.

"I am sure it was quite a weight upon papa's mind at the last,"

murmured Jane. "Did he talk much of her?" she continued, lifting her eyes to Lady Oakburn.

The countess replied almost eagerly. That some mystery was attached to one of the earl's daughters she knew; for in the time of her residence in the house as governess, chance words relating to the Lady Clarice had been dropped in her hearing. But she had heard nothing further. After her marriage she inquired about her of the earl, but he had passed the question over lightly, as if not caring to speak of the subject. This she now told Jane.

"But—do you mean to say, Lady Oakburn, that papa did not acquaint you with the particulars?" asked Jane in some surprise.

"He never did. I am sure he did not like to speak upon the subject."

"I wonder that he did not tell you," said Jane.

"I don't wonder at it at all," dissented Laura. "*I* don't like to speak about it. Would you believe, Lady Oakburn, that I have never once mentioned it to my husband? He has not the least idea that we ever had another sister."

"But why do you not tell him?" returned Lady Oakburn.

"I don't know," mused Laura. "I cannot bear to speak of Clarice to any one. It does not sound nice to confess to a sister who went out as a governess in disobedience, and does not come home again. I say I can't explain the feeling, but it is within me, very strongly. I dare say papa felt the same; we were much alike, he and I. It will be time enough to tell my husband about Clarice when she is found."

"Did she go out in disobedience?" asked Lady Oakburn.

"Yes," said Laura. "It was very wilful of her. I don't mind talking of it to you, Lady Oakburn, as you know something about it, and we are upon the subject. For a long, long time, papa would not so much as allow her name to be mentioned in the house. By the way, Jane," she continued: "do you know a thought has struck me more than once. You remember that scrap of a letter that I brought to you when you first came back to South Wennock?"

"Do I remember it?" repeated Jane. "I look at it often. It puzzles me more than I care to say."

"Well, what has struck me is, that perhaps—it is just possible—papa in his anger opened that letter, although it was addressed to you, and tore it up as soon as opened."

"No," said Jane. "So unable was I to find any solution to the matter, that I, like you, fancied it possible papa had opened it, and I wrote to him from South Wennock and asked him the question."

"And he said he had not done so?"

"He wrote to me by return of post. He had never seen or heard of any such letter."

"Then I think I remember the circumstance—that is, your letter coming to him," interposed the countess, looking at Jane. "He was reading a letter from you one morning at breakfast, when he grew a little excited, a little angry, and exclaimed that he should like to know what Jane could mean. Lucy asked what it was, and he answered that Jane had been writing to know if he had opened one of Clarice's letters: as if he *would* have opened anything from her at that time, he added: he would not have touched one with the end of his stick. I recollect the words quite well," continued Lady Oakburn. "And I know I longed to inquire what the trouble was, regarding Lady Clarice, but I did not like to do so."

Jane sighed. "I feel—I begin to feel that we shall never find Clarice."

"That's nonsense," returned Laura. "She is sure to be found some day, living or dead."

"Living or dead," repeated Jane in low tones. "Yes, perhaps so. But it will not be living."

Laura preferred the sunny points of life to the shadows, and rarely took a dark view of anything. These unpleasant forebodings sounded as "nonsense" in her ears. Jane turned to Lady Oakburn and related to her the whole history of Clarice from beginning to end. It impressed Lady Oakburn greatly; she thought she had never heard of anything so singular as this prolonged disappearance.

In narrating the story, Jane made a passing allusion to the dream relating to Clarice, which had so disturbed her. Laura, who was putting the sleeping baby then into his little cot, interrupted her with a ridiculing word.

"Dreams, indeed! One would suppose you were some old nurse, Jane! How you can dwell upon that absurdity still, and repeat it, I cannot understand. Lady Oakburn is staring at you—and well she may!"

"At any rate we have never heard of Clarice since that dream," was Jane's answer; and her low, earnest voice told how much the subject affected her. "When Clarice shall be restored to us, safe and well, *then* I will forget my dream."

Laura threw up her supercilious head, and turned her back upon Jane. "I must put on my things," she remarked to the countess. "Your servants and horses will think I am never coming. I sent orders down that they should wait when Jane returned."

Jane had seen the look of surprise on Lady Oakburn's face, and spoke as Laura left the room. "I ought to tell you, Lady Oakburn, as a sort of answer to Laura's ridicule, that in the course of my past life three or four most singular dreams have visited me. They have borne a strange coincidence—to say the least of it—with events that have speedily followed. I am not by nature superstitious; I

believe that I was born the reverse of it; but it is impossible these dreams should not have fixed themselves on my mind, as something neither to be accounted for nor understood."

"And you had one of these singular dreams relating to Lady Clarice?"

"I had. She was not Lady Clarice then. It was a very dreadful dream, and it appeared to shadow forth her death. Hour by hour, day by day, the dream, taken in conjunction with Clarice's prolonged disappearance, becomes more vivid to my memory. I *cannot* forget it."

"What was it?" asked Lady Oakburn.

"I would prefer not to tell it you," replied Jane. "Sometimes I think that if I related it to Laura she would ridicule it less than she does."

"You have not related it to her?"

"No. To her, of all others, I must be silent."

"But why to her in particular, Lady Jane?"

"Well, the cause is—but it sounds foolish even in my own ears when mentioned, so what must it do to a listener? The fact is—and a very curious fact it is, one which I cannot understand—that in this dream Mr. Carlton, Laura's husband, was most unpleasantly prominent. The details I say I cannot give you, but I dreamt that Clarice was dead—I dreamt that she appeared to me dead, and that she indicated Mr. Carlton as being the cause of her death, or in some manner aiding in it."

The countess's mind was utterly free from superstition, and in a silent, polite manner she had been wondering at Lady Jane. But the awe on the latter's countenance, the hushed voice, the *solemnity* in Jane's words, imparted their own impression to her, and she felt inclined to shiver.

"He was not Laura's husband then, but I was in the habit of seeing him daily, for he was my father's medical attendant; and I argue with myself that that fact, seeing him so frequently, caused him to be mixed up with my dream. I argue that it must have been a purely accidental coincidence. But in spite of this, in spite of myself, my reason, my judgment, I cannot get that sight of Mr. Carlton, as I saw him in the dream, from my mind; and ever since that moment I have felt a sort of horror of Mr. Carlton. I cannot expect you, Lady Oakburn, to excuse this, or to understand it. I feel myself that it is wrong."

"But did Mr. Carlton know your sister Clarice?" demanded the countess, growing strangely interested.

"Certainly not. And therefore my reason and good sense rise up in condemnation against me, while the feeling, the horror, remains. I did once mention this to Laura—that Mr. Carlton was mixed up

most unpleasantly in the dream, and that I could not help regarding him with a sort of dread; but I fancy she has forgotten it. It was before her marriage. At any rate, what with this, and what with Laura's general ridicule of such things, I never care to allude to the dream in her presence. I never should allude to it but as an explanation of the cause why I grew uneasy and wrote to Clarice those letters which have never been answered."

"Won't you relate the dream to me?" asked the countess, in her interest. "I confess I am no believer in the theory some entertain, that dreams are sent as warnings; I fear I ridicule them as heartily as Lady Laura; but I should like to hear this one."

Jane shook her head. "I have never told it to any one. Pardon me, Lady Oakburn, if I still decline to repeat it to you. Independent of my own unconquerable repugnance, I do not think it would be fair towards Mr. Carlton."

Lady Oakburn could not forbear a smile, and Jane saw it.

"Yes," she said in answer: "I know how foolish all this must seem to you. It *is* foolish: and I should be thankful if I could overcome the prejudice it has given me against Mr. Carlton. That prejudice is the most foolish of all. I feel how unjustifiable it is; and yet——"

Another dreamer interrupted them: the infant peer in his cradle. He raised his voice with all the power of his little lungs, and Jane hastened to take him up and carry him to the countess.

Laura meanwhile, in Lady Oakburn's carriage, was being rattled over the stones of London. The carriage took its way to the East-end, to a populous but certainly not fashionable locality. She was about to pay an impromptu visit to her husband's father, Mr. Carlton.

In a crowded and remote thoroughfare, where riches and poverty, bustle and idleness, industry and guilt, seemed to mingle incongruously together, was situated the residence of Mr. Carlton. The carriage drew up before a square, red-brick house; not large, but sufficiently commodious. It stood a little back from the street, and a paved court led to the entrance. On the door was a brass plate: "Mr. Carlton, Surgeon;" and over the door a large lamp of yellow and red glass.

Laura stepped from the carriage, and a man-servant opened the door almost the instant that she had rung.

"Can I see Mr. Carlton?"

"Not now, ma'am. It is not my master's hour for receiving patients. In a moment he will have left on his round of visits."

The servant by a slight gesture indicated a plain-looking brougham in waiting. Laura had not noticed it. The refusal did not please her, and she put on her most imperious manner.

"Your master *is* at home?"

"He is at home, ma'am, but I cannot admit you. It is the hour for his carriage, and—and there he is going to it," added the servant, evidently relieved, for he did not like controversy.

Laura turned quickly; a thin man of sixty had come out of a side door, and was crossing the paved court. She stepped up and confronted him.

"Mr. Carlton, I presume?"

She need not have asked. In the slender, spare, gentlemanlike form, in the well-shaped features, the impassive expression of face, she saw her husband over again: her husband as he would be when thirty more years should have passed over his head—if they were so destined to pass. In the elder man's sharp tone, his decisive gesture as he turned and answered to the call, she recognized the very manner of him so familiar to her. The tone and manner were not discourteous, certainly, but short and very uncompromising.

"I am Mr. Carlton. What is your business?"

"I have come to see you, sir. I have come all the way from the West-end to see you."

Mr. Carlton glanced at the carriage. He saw the earl's coronet on it; he saw the servants in their handsome livery—for mourning was not assumed yet for the earl. But Mr. Carlton did not entertain a very great reverence for earls on the whole, and carriages and servants he only regarded as necessary appendages to comfort to those who could afford them.

"Then I'm very sorry you should have come at this hour, madam," he said. "I cannot see patients at home after the clock strikes three: and it struck two minutes ago; you might have heard it from yonder church. Were I to break the rule once, I might break it always. If you will call to-morrow at——"

"I am not a patient," interrupted Laura.

"Not a patient? What are you, then?"

"I am your son's wife, sir: Lady Laura Carlton."

Mr. Carlton betrayed no surprise. He looked at her for a minute or two, his impassive face never changing. Then he held out his arm with civility, and led her to the house. The entrance at the forbidden hour which he would have denied to a patient, however valuable, he accorded to his daughter-in-law.

He handed her into a room on the ground floor, a dining-room evidently; a dark, sombre apartment, with heavy crimson velvet curtains, and handsome furniture as sombre as the room. The manservant was removing the remains of luncheon from the table; but his master stopped him with a motion of the hand.

"Lay it again, Gervase."

"Not for me," interposed Laura, as she sat down in an arm-

chair. "I would prefer not to take anything," she added, to Mr. Carlton.

The servant went away with his tray. And Mr. Carlton turned to her. "And so you are the young lady my son has married. I wish you health and happiness!"

"You are very kind," said Laura, beginning to take a dislike to Mr. Carlton. She knew how useful some of his hoarded gains would be to them; she hated him for his stinginess in not having helped his son: and she had come down in an impulse that morning to pay him court and make friends with him. But there was something in his calm eye and calm bearing that told her her object would be lost, if that object was to get him to aid them. And Laura entrenched herself within her own pride, and set herself to dislike him—as she always did dislike any one who thwarted her.

"I am in London for a few days, Mr. Carlton, and I thought I would come and make your acquaintance before I left it. I did not know it would be disagreeable to you."

"It is not disagreeable to me. I am pleased to see you here. Is Lewis in town with you?"

"As if he would not have come to you if he had been!" retorted Laura. "I was summoned to town on grievous business," she continued, her eye and voice alike softening. "My father was dying. I did not arrive in time to see him alive."

"Your father? I beg your pardon, I forget who——"

"The Earl of Oakburn," imperiously answered Laura, feeling excessively offended, and scarcely crediting the lapse of memory.

"The Earl of Oakburn: true. When I read of his death I felt sure that I ought to remember that name for some particular reason, but I forgot that he was the father of my son's wife. You look angry, my dear; but if you had the work on your hands that I have, you would not wonder at my forgetfulness. I and Lewis had very scant correspondence on the subject of his marriage, and I am not sure that your father's name was mentioned in it more than once. Your own name is Laura."

"I am Lady Laura," was the answer, given with a flash of impetuosity.

"And a very pretty name it is! Laura! I had a little sister of that name once, who died. Dear me, it seems ages and ages ago to look back upon! And how is Lewis getting on in South Wennock? He ought to be a skilful practitioner by this time. He has mettle in him if he chooses to put it out."

"He gets on as well as a doctor can do who has his way to make unassisted," returned Laura. "No one helps him. He ought to keep a close carriage, but he can't afford it."

If he had afforded it, his wife would have appropriated it for her

own use. Driving down in that coroneted carriage with all the signs of rank and wealth about it, was a pastime most acceptable to Laura in her vanity.

"Ah, Lewis must be content to wait for that," remarked Mr. Carlton. "I did not keep a close carriage until I had been more years in practice than Lewis has. Tell him from me, my dear, that those who know how to win, generally know how to wait."

"I will not tell him," said Laura boldly. "I think, sir, you ought to help him."

"Do you, young lady? What does he get by his practice? Six or seven hundred a year?"

"Well, yes; I think he gets as much as that."

"It's more than I did at his age. *And I would recommend him to make it suffice.*"

The peculiar emphasis which accompanied the words, told a tale to Laura: no help must be expected from Mr. Carlton. Laura threw back her head disdainfully. Only asking it for the sake of him whom she so loved, really careless of money herself, she felt anger rather than disappointment. She rose to leave.

"Your husband knows my disposition, Lady Laura: that I never can be badgered into anything—and you must pardon the word. Tell him I have not altered my will; I shall not alter it if he keeps in my good books; but he must look to his own exertions while I live, not to me."

"I think you are a very unkind father, Mr. Carlton."

"My dear, you can think so if you please," was the equable answer, given in all courtesy. "You don't know your husband's disposition yet. Shall I tell you what he is? He makes, you say, six or seven hundred a year. If I allowed him, from to-day, six or seven hundred in addition, making twelve or fourteen, by the year's end he would find that too little, and ask for fourteen hundred more. Lewis is safe to spend all his income, no matter from what sources it may be derived; and I don't care to have my hard-earned money wasted during my lifetime."

Laura drew her black lace shawl round her with supercilious meaning, and swept from the room, deaf to offers of wine and other good things. Mr. Carlton followed, and held out his arm. Had it been any one but her husband's father she would have refused it.

"Where are you staying?" he asked.

"In the house with my dead father," passionately answered Laura. "I should not have quitted it on any errand but this."

"I have been glad to see you, my dear. I shall always be glad to see you and Lewis. Come and stay with me, both of you, at any time. Should business or pleasure bring you to London, Lady Laura, and you can reconcile yourself to this end of the

town, make my house your home. You shall be heartily welcomed."

He led her out with quite an excess of stately courtesy, bowed her into the waiting carriage, lifted his hat, and stood bareheaded until she had driven away.

"He is a gentleman, with all his meanness," quoth Laura to herself. "Somehow I had feared he might not be so. And I can understand now why he and Lewis have been so antagonistic—they are too much like each other."

CHAPTER XL.

THE FACE AGAIN!

It was the day of the funeral of the Earl of Oakburn. In her dressing-room sat his widow, wearing her deep mourning robes and her white cap, the insignia of her bereft condition. Near to her, in robes of mourning as deep, sat the earl's daughters, Jane, Laura, and Lucy. Lucy the child cried incessantly; Laura ever and anon gave vent to a frantic burst; Jane was tranquil. Tranquil outwardly; and none, save perhaps the countess, suspected the real inward suffering. What with the loss of him, gone from their sight in this world for ever, and the loss of one they knew not how gone, Jane Chesney's grief was too bitterly acute for outward sign; it lay deeper than the surface.

The Earl of Oakburn and the dowager countess were left in graves side by side each other in the large cemetery; and the solicitor to the Oakburn family was coming in with the wills. A copy of that made by the countess was to be read, because it was known that legacies were left to some of those ladies sitting there. The lawyer, Mr. Mole, was a thin man, with a white shirt-frill, who surreptitiously took snuff every three minutes from under his handkerchief.

He solaced himself with a good pinch outside the dressing-room door, and went in bowing, two parchments in his hand. Lady Oakburn was not strong enough to go to the apartments below, and the lawyer was received here, as had been arranged. The will of the earl was the one he retained in his hand to read first. He took his seat and opened it.

Lord Oakburn had it not in his power to bequeath much. The estate was charged with the payment of five hundred a year to his eldest daughter, Jane Chesney, for her life; to his second daughter, Laura Carlton, he left his *forgiveness;* and to his third and fourth daughters, Clarice Beauchamp, and Lucy Eleanor, the sum of three

thousand pounds each. Lucy was left under the personal guardianship of his wife, Eliza, Countess of Oakburn, who was charged with the expense of her education and maintenance; Clarice, when she was found, was to have her home with the countess, if she pleased; and if she did not so please, he prayed his daughter Jane to afford her one. Should it be ascertained that any untoward fate had overtaken Clarice (so ran the words of the will), that she should no longer be living, then the three thousand pounds were to revert to Jane absolutely. Lucy's three thousand were to accumulate until she was twenty-one. A sum of three hundred pounds was to be equally divided at once among his four daughters, "to provide them with decent mourning," Clarice's share to be handed over to Jane, that it might be set aside for her.

Such were the terms of the will, as related to the earl's daughters. The part of it regarding his wife and son (the latter of whom was not born when it was made, though it provided for the contingency) need not be touched upon, for it does not concern us.

When the will was read, Mr. Mole laid it down, took up the copy of that of the dowager countess, and began to read it with scarcely a moment's interval. The old lady, who had plenty of money in her own right, had bequeathed five thousand pounds each to her grandnieces Jane and Lucy Eleanor Chesney. Jane's five thousand was to be paid over to her within twelve months, Lucy's was to be left to accumulate until she should be of age, both principal and interest. Neither Laura nor Clarice was mentioned in her will. Even to the last the old countess could not forgive Clarice for attempting to earn her own living; neither had she forgiven Laura's marriage.

To describe the sore feeling, the anger, the resentment of Lady Laura at finding herself passed over both by her father and her aunt, would be a difficult task. She was of hasty and passionate temper, something like her father, too apt to give way to it upon trifling occasions, but she did not do so now. There are some injuries, or what we deem such, which tell so keenly upon the feelings, that they bury themselves in silence, and rankle there. This was one of them. Laura Carlton made no remark, no observation; she expressed not a word of disappointment, or said that it was so. One lightning flash of anger, which no one saw but the solicitor, and outward demonstration was over.

The lawyer took four parcels of bank-notes from his pocket-book, each to the amount of seventy-five pounds. Two of these parcels he handed to Lady Jane; her own and Clarice's; one to the countess as Lucy's share; the other parcel to Lady Laura.

And Laura took the notes without a word. Her indignant fingers trembled to fling them back in Mr. Mole's face; but she contrived

to restrain herself. "He might have left me better off," she breathed to Jane in the course of the evening; and then she bit her lips for having said so much.

Jane also had her disappointment; but she had been prepared for it. Not a disappointment as regarded money matters: she was left as well off as she expected to be, and felt grateful to her father for doing so much, and to her aunt for her handsome legacy. Her disappointment related to Lucy. That the child whom she had loved and tended, whom in her heart she believed herself capable of training into the good Christian, the refined gentlewoman at least as efficiently as the countess, should be left away from her care, entrusted to another, was indeed a bitter trial. Jane, like Laura, spoke not of her mortification; but, unlike Laura, she strove to subdue it. "It is only another cross in my tried life," she murmured to herself. "I must take it up meekly, and pray for help to bear it."

"You should have her entirely indeed, if the will allowed it," said the countess to Jane, for she divined the disappointment, and the tears in her eyes proved the fervour with which she spoke. "I love her greatly; but I would not have been so selfish as to keep her from you. She shall visit you as often as you like, Lady Jane; she is more yours than mine."

Jane caught at the words. "Let me take her home with me for a little change then. She feels the loss greatly, and change of scene will be good for her. She can remain a week or two with me until you are strong again."

"Willingly, willingly," was the answer. "Ask for her when you will, at any time, and she shall go to you. Unless—unless——" Lady Oakburn suddenly stopped.

"Unless what?" asked Jane.

"Oh, I feel that I scarcely dare to mention it," returned the countess. "I spoke in impulse. Pray pardon me, Lady Jane! My thought was—unless you would return and make this your home."

Jane shook her head. "No," she said; "I think I must have a home of my own. I have become used to it, you see. But I will come to you sometimes, and be your guest."

So Lucy went with Jane to South Wennock. They journeyed down the second day after the funeral. Laura was silent on the way, somewhat resentful, as she brooded bitterly over the news she had to carry to her husband. Once she turned in the carriage and spoke to Jane quite sharply.

"Why did you never tell me you had asked papa about that torn note of Clarice's? No one seems to care for me, I think."

Jane Chesney sighed wearily. "I don't know why I did not. Somehow I do not like to talk of Clarice; and it only left the mystery where it was."

They reached Great Wennock in safety. Laura had not apprized her husband of her coming, and there was no carriage in waiting; the disappointment to be inflicted on him had deterred her. The omnibus and one fly stood at the station. Judith was hastening to secure the latter, but was too late. A handsome stripling leaped into it before her. It was Frederick Grey.

"Oh, Master Grey?" she said in dismayed accents. He looked tall enough now to be Mr. Grey; but Judith adhered to the familiar salutation. "You'll give up the fly, won't you, sir!"

"I dare say, Judith!" returned the young gentleman, with a laugh. "There's the omnibus for you."

"It's not for me, Master Frederick. The ladies are here."

He glanced across, caught sight of them, and was out of the fly in an instant, lugging with him a box, which he took to the omnibus, and offered the fly to Lady Jane. He stood with his hat in his hand, a frank smile on his pleasant countenance as he pressed them to take it.

"But it is not right to deprive you of it," said Jane. "You had it first."

"What, and leave you the omnibus, Lady Jane! What would you think of me? A jolting won't hurt me; it's rather fun than otherwise. I should walk, if it were not for the rain."

"Have you come from London?"

"Oh no. Only from Lichford."

He helped to place them in the fly, and they were obliged to make room for Judith, for it was raining fast, and Jane would not let her go outside. Lucy gazed at him as he stood there raising his hat when they drove away.

"What a nice face!" she exclaimed. "I like him so much, Jane!"

"I declare I forgot to tell him that we saw his father," said Jane. "I must send for him to call."

Mr. Carlton's was first reached. Lady Laura alighted, and the fly drove on with the rest towards Cedar Lodge. Mr. Carlton was at home, and he welcomed Laura with many kisses. It was late, and tea was on the table; the room, bright with fire, looked cheering after her journey. Mr. Carlton loved her still, and her absence had been felt by him.

"Between Pembury and London you have been away thirteen days, Laura! And I, longing for you all the time, thinking they would never pass!"

"There is no place like home, after all," said Laura. "And oh, Lewis, there's no one like you! We stayed over the funeral, you know, and—to—to hear the will read."

"And how are things left?" asked Mr. Carlton. "I suppose you

are so rich now, that we poor commoners must scarcely dare to approach you."

Laura had been sitting before the fire, her feet on the fender, Mr. Carlton leaning caressingly over her. She suddenly sprang up and turned her back upon him, apparently busying herself with some trifles that lay on a side table. She had an inward conviction that her news would not be palatable to her husband.

"Laura, I say, I suppose you inherit ten or twenty thousand pounds at the least? The countess dowager was good to you for ten, I should think."

"I was deliberating how I should soften things to you, and I can't do it. I'll tell you the worst at once," she cried, flashing round and meeting him face to face. "I am disinherited, Lewis."

He made no reply: he only looked at her with eager, questioning eyes.

"Papa has not left me a shilling—except a trifle for mourning. It stated in the will that he bequeathed me *his forgiveness*. My aunt has given ten thousand pounds between Jane and Lucy; nothing to me."

A bitter word all but escaped the lips of Mr. Carlton; he managed to suppress it before it was spoken.

"Left you nothing?" he repeated. "Neither of them."

"Seventy-five pounds for mourning—and the 'forgiveness!' Oh, Lewis, it is shameful: it is an awful disappointment; a disgraceful injustice; and I feel it more for you than for myself."

"And Jane?" he asked, after a pause.

"Jane has five hundred a year for life, and five thousand pounds absolutely. And other moneys contingent upon deaths. What shall we do, Lewis?"

"Make the best of it," replied Mr. Carlton. "There is an old saying, Laura: 'What can't be cured must be endured;' you and I must exemplify it."

She snatched up her bonnet and left the room hastily, as if to avoid saying more, leaving Mr. Carlton alone. A change came over his features then, and a livid look, whether called up by anger, or memory, or physical pain, appeared on them. The fire played on his face, rendering its features quite clear, although there was no other light in the room. This apartment, if you remember, had two large windows; one looking to the front, one to the side, near the surgery entrance. The front window had been closed for the night; the other had not; possibly Mr. Carlton had a mind to see what patients came at that dark hour. He stood in one position opposite this window, buried in thoughts called up by the communication of his wife. His eyes were bent to the ground, his hands fell listlessly on either side of him; he had trusted to this inheritance of Laura's

to clear them from their imprudently contracted debts. Mr. Carlton so stood for some minutes, and then lifted his eyes.

Lifted his eyes to rest upon—what? Peering into the fire-lit room, pressed flat against a window-pane, was that never-forgotten face. The awful face, whether human or hobgoblin, which had so scared him the night of Mrs. Crane's death, and again the second night in Captain Chesney's garden.

It scared him still. And Mr. Carlton staggered against the wall, as if he would be out of its sight, his suppressed cry of terror echoing through the room.

PART THE SECOND.

CHAPTER I.

SEAFORD.

SEVEN years to look forward to is a great period of time; to the young it seems almost interminable. It is long in passing: for we count it by hours, days, weeks, months, and years. But what is it in the retrospect?—a bubble, as it were, on the ocean; a speck in the span of life. Since the last chapter, seven years have gone over the heads of the actors in this history, and now the reader is invited to meet some of them again.

Seated on the sands of a fashionable and somewhat exclusive English watering-place was a group of ladies. Some were working as they talked, some were reading, some were enjoying in idleness and silence the fresh breeze that came wafted over the sea, and some were watching the sports of the children in the distance, running hither and thither and building castles upon the sand. A bevy of girls had congregated together, rather apart, but still within reach of voice and hearing. They were intent on their own pursuits, their peculiar interests: dress, flirtation, the libraries, the fashionable promenades of the day, the assemblies in the rooms at night. Just now they seemed inclined to be quarrelsome rather than sociable. Jealousy was creeping in amongst them.

"Say what you will, Miss Lake," exclaimed one, "but I maintain that he is the most distinguished-looking man staying at Seaford. Am I not right?" she added, appealing to her companions.

The speaker was a tall, stately girl, with aquiline features, pale and classic. She was the daughter of General and Mrs. Vaughan, and was staying with them at Seaford. The Miss Lake she had replied to was plain and cynical. And Miss Lake, in place of answering, again drew down the corners of her lips.

"I don't care whether he's 'distinguished-looking' or not," spoke up a pretty girl, Fanny Darlington. "I know he is the pleasantest man I ever spoke to. And if he is 'distinguished' it does not make him disagreeable. I hate your distinguished-looking men; they are generally vain and unapproachable; two faults that he steers clear of. He danced with me twice last night."

"And not once with Augusta Lake, and that's why she is accusing him this morning."

A slight smile, suppressed out of good manners, appeared on the lips of several. Miss Vaughan was the only one who spoke.

"Dancing goes for nothing. A man may whirl himself giddy, dancing with a woman, and yet not care for her; while he may be secretly attached to one, whom he never asks to walk through a quadrille."

"You say that, because he sits at your side in the rooms, and talks to you by the hour together, Helen Vaughan," interposed Fanny Darlington, who sometimes spoke more freely than was quite requisite. "But you will be none the nearer to him, for all that. I don't believe he cares two pins for any girl at Seaford."

A tale-telling flush rose to the face of Helen Vaughan. She shook back her head haughtily, as if to intimate that retort would be beneath her.

"Talking about the rooms, though, who was it he was with there last night?" asked Miss Lake. "I have not seen her before. A lovely girl."

"I'm sure I saw him with no lovely girl at the rooms last night," struck in Helen Vaughan.

"I know who Miss Lake means," cried Fanny Darlington. "She *is* lovely. She sat with a tall, majestic-looking lady, quite a Juno, and he kept coming up to them. I was near when he asked her to dance. She refused, and said her mamma wished her not to do so; and he turned to the Juno, and inquired whether it was true——"

"A very ugly Juno in face, whatever she may be in figure," interrupted Augusta Lake.

"How you do stop me! The Juno said Yes; she thought it better that (I could not catch the name) should not dance with him, because she would then have less plea for refusing others."

"Some second-rate City people, who would stick themselves up for 'quality,' and say the frequenters of the rooms are not good enough for them," remarked the general's daughter, with a lofty sneer.

"No, they don't look like that; quite another sort of thing," said a young lady quietly, who had not yet spoken. "I think they *are* 'quality,' not would-be."

"Rubbish!" cried Miss Lake. "How do you know anything of them, Mary Miller?"

"I have the use of my eyes, and can observe them as well as you, that's all. You saw that child who came on the sands yesterday morning, with a maid and an old black servant?"

"Well, what of him?"

"In the afternoon I saw her—the young lady—driving about with

the same child," returned Miss Miller. "I infer that they are people of consequence."

"How *can* you infer it?" flashed Helen Vaughan, as if the remark disturbed her temper. "Every one sojourning at Seaford drives out daily. You are turning silly, Mary."

Miss Miller laughed as she answered. In her quiet way she liked to excite the ire of Miss Vaughan. "The carriage was well-appointed," was all she said.

"You may get 'well-appointed' carriages by paying six shillings an hour for them," was Miss Vaughan's scornful answer.

"So you may," said Mary Miller. "But the carriage they were in was not hired. The footman had powdered hair and a gold-headed cane; and the silver plates of the harness and the panels of the carriage displayed a coronet."

Had the speaker announced that the harness and panels displayed a live griffin, it could not have aroused more excitement. "A coronet!" broke from the lips of those around.

"An earl's coronet. So if she is an earl's daughter, as we may assume, it would be somewhat *infra dig.* for her to be found dancing in these rooms, liable to be waltzed about by any clerk from London who may pay his subscription to go in—whatever you may say to the contrary, Miss Vaughan."

"It is singular I should not have observed them last night," was Miss Vaughan's remark.

"They did not stay long," said Fanny Darlington; "and seemed to come in more to see what the rooms were like, than to remain. He went out with them, but came back again. He appeared to know them intimately."

"Some of his patients, no doubt," cried Miss Lake. "Medical men are always——"

"Hush, Augusta! Here he is. Don't ask who the people were."

A tall, slender man was slowly approaching the group. Certainly he was what Miss Vaughan had just described him—distinguished-looking. The thoughtful expression of his intelligent countenance, full of the beauty of intellect, gave him the appearance of being somewhat older than his age, which may have been about five-and-twenty. But it was neither for his fine form nor his handsome face that he was popular; popular with all classes; it was for his charm of manner. Quiet and refined, gentlemanly in bearing and in thought, he yet bore about him that frankness of speech, that winning courtesy to others, which is the great passport to favour, and which can never be assumed by those who possess it not.

Do you guess who it was? You have seen him before. It was that impetuous boy of years gone by, Frederick Grey. But Frederick Grey grown into manhood.

The change in the fortunes of Stephen Grey had been wonderful. At least it would have appeared wonderful, but that the rise had been so progressive, one step leading easily and naturally, as it were, to another. Eight years ago, barely as much yet, he had been a general practitioner in South Wennock, the modest dispenser of his own medicines; and now he was Sir Stephen Grey, a baronet, and one of the royal physicians.

A wonderful rise, you will say. In truth it was so. But the transition had been, I repeat, easy and gradual. His settling in London was the turning-point in his fortunes, and they had continued to rise step by step throughout the succeeding years. Practice first flew in to him, and he obtained a name. How valuable that is to a physician, more especially a London physician, let them tell you. Next he had been appointed to attend on royalty, and was knighted by the Queen. And now, about twelve months ago, his patent of baronetcy had been made out for "Stephen Grey and his heirs for ever." There was scarcely a medical man in the metropolis who was so popular as Sir Stephen Grey; certainly none who had risen so rapidly.

Frederick, as you know, had been trained to his father's profession. He would soon take his degree as M.D. A break had occurred in his medical studies, for when Sir Stephen found his fortunes rising, he judged it right to afford his son the advantages of a more liberal education, and Frederick was despatched to keep his terms at Oxford. No wonder he was sought after by those young ladies on the Seaford sands!—the heir to a baronetcy and the inheritor of wealth—for Sir Stephen was putting by largely! Added to these advantages were his own personal attractions, his high character, his fascinating manners. The whole combined in one man might well be deemed a prize.

Lady Grey, no stronger in health than she had ever been, had come to Seaford for the sea air, accompanied by her son. They had been there a fortnight now, and Mr. Frederick, as you perceive, had not failed to make himself a mark of interest; though probably using no effort of his own in the process.

He walked slowly towards those susceptible young ladies, and a change came over them all: that change from apathy to interest which the presence of such a man is sure to bring with it. Perhaps there was not a girl sitting there who would not have been glad to be his chosen, what with his attractions and his fair prospects in life.

He shook hands with some, he chatted with others, he had a pleasant look and word for all; but Helen Vaughan contrived to monopolize him—as she generally did. He thought nothing yet of her doing so, for he was accustomed to the homage of women. He never suspected that she had any particular motive for it; most

certainly he did not suspect that she was permitting herself to become seriously attached to him.

"How is Lady Grey?" called out Fanny Darlington.

"Thank you," he replied; "she is not well this morning. I begged her not to think of coming up on the sands to-day."

"How vexing!" exclaimed Miss Vaughan. "Vexing that she should be ill, and vexing on my own account," she added, with a fascinating smile. "You see this work that I am doing, Mr. Grey?"

"Very complicated work it seems to be," was his laughing reply, as he glanced at the fragile fabric of threads she held out to him.

"I cannot get on with it, do you know. I am doing it under Lady Grey's instructions, and cannot tell which part to take up next. If I thought mamma would not mind my walking alone through the streets, I would go to your house, and take further instructions from her. Is she well enough to see friends?" continued the young lady quickly.

"Quite well enough."

"I think I must go to her, then. It is so tiresome to be at a standstill. Besides, I am working against time; this is for a wedding present."

"I can tell you how to go on with it, if you like," interrupted Augusta Lake. "There's not the least necessity for troubling Lady Grey."

Helen Vaughan shook her head dubiously. "But if you should tell me wrongly?—and I had to pick the work out again! No, I would rather trust to Lady Grey, as she has shown me throughout. Would it be troubling her too much, Mr. Grey?" appealing to him with her handsome eyes.

"On the contrary, I think my mother would be glad to receive you," he replied. "On these monotonous mornings, when she is confined to the sofa, she is often pleased to see a visitor."

Helen Vaughan rose, but she did not move away; she stood where she was, and seemed lost in deliberation.

"I scarcely know what to do; mamma has so great a dislike to our walking through the streets alone."

Augusta Lake's lip curled scornfully, and she did not take any pains to conceal it.

"Will you accept of my escort?" asked the gentleman of Miss Vaughan. Could he say anything less?

"Oh, thank you!" exclaimed Helen, with a rosy flush. "Though I am extremely sorry to give you the trouble, Mr. Grey."

He had taken a step or two by her side when he found himself arrested. A little pale lad had come up, and was pulling him backwards. He wore a plain brown-holland tunic, and his straw hat had a bit of straw-coloured ribbon tied round it. There was

nothing about the child to indicate his quality or condition; his attire might have been equally worn by one of no degree, or by a son of her Majesty the Queen.

"Hey, Frank! Where did you spring from?"

"Mamma's there. She said I might run to you."

"Who is that child, Mr. Grey?" came the eager inquiry, for the gossiping young ladies had recognized him as the one to whom they had alluded.

Mr. Grey caught the boy in his arms and perched him on his shoulder.

"Tell who you are, Frank."

Master Frank did not choose to speak; he was shy. One hand stole round Frederick Grey's neck; the fingers of the other he inserted into his own mouth.

"The child was here yesterday with a black servant," began Miss Lake; "but——"

"It was Pompey," interrupted the boy, finding his tongue. "Put me down, please, Mr. Grey; I want to go for my spade."

"There you are, then," he returned, depositing him on his legs. "But, Frank, I am ashamed of you. Not to tell your name when you are asked it!"

"It's Frank," said the boy, running away over the sand.

"Who is he really, Mr. Grey?"

"Lord Oakburn."

"Lord Oakburn! The young Earl of Oakburn, who was born when his father died?"

"The same," said Mr. Grey. "He is a somewhat delicate boy, and Lady Oakburn has brought him here for a month's sea-bathing."

"It was his mother we saw you so amiable with at the rooms last night, then?" cried Miss Lake. "And the young lady—who was she?"

"A very lovely girl: quite charming to look upon," interposed Fanny Darlington rather maliciously, as she stole a glance at Miss Vaughan. "Who was she, Mr. Grey?"

"His sister, Lady Lucy Chesney."

"Are they patients of yours, Mr. Grey?" asked Helen Vaughan coldly.

"Of Sir Stephen's; not of mine," he answered, laughing.

"By the way, Mr. Grey, I thought you expected Sir Stephen down last Sunday."

"We expected him on Saturday, but he was unable to come. He will be here next Saturday, if not again prevented."

The little lord ran up again, spade in hand.

"Mr. Grey, Lucy says I am to tell you we have heard from town."

"Is Lucy there?" suddenly responded Mr. Grey, turning his head. "She told me she——"

The words died away with the steps of the speaker; for he strode off, quite oblivious of any recollection of Miss Vaughan. At some distance, tracing characters on the sands with her parasol, in a cool and pretty muslin dress, stood an elegant girl of middle height and graceful bearing, her features inexpressibly refined and beautiful, her complexion bright and delicate. It was Lucy Chesney. The little girl of the short frocks had grown into this lovely young woman of nineteen. Blushes rose to her face so obviously as Frederick Grey approached her, that they might have told a tale, had any one been there to read it. Miss Vaughan looked on from the distance, her heart sinking, her lips paling. If ever she saw the signs of mutual love, she believed she saw them then.

Miss Vaughan was not deceived. Love, and love in no measured degree, had long ago sprung up between Frederick Grey and Lucy Chesney. That introduction of Stephen Grey to the Countess of Oakburn by Lady Jane—though indeed we ought to give Judith the credit of it—had led to a personal intimacy between the families, which had ripened into close and lasting friendship. Lady Oakburn, poor for her rank, living a retired life in the house in Portland Place, educating Lucy, training her little boy, had been more inclined to form quiet friendships than to frequent the society of the gay world. A little gaiety now Lucy was out—and she had been presented in the past spring—but the long friendship with the Greys could not be superseded by all the gaiety in the world. It had brought forth its fruits, that friendship; for Lucy Chesney's heart had gone out for all time to that attractive young man, now bending to whisper his honeyed words.

Medical men have their prejudices in favour of certain watering-places, some patronizing one place, some another. Sir Stephen Grey's pet place was Seaford. His wife generally visited it once a year. In short, Sir Stephen recommended it to all his patients, especially to those whose maladies were more imaginary than real. It was he who had said to Lady Oakburn, not ten days ago: "Take the boy to Seaford." The boy, young Frank, was sickly, and his mother, as a matter of course, was very anxious. The boy had the sturdy independence of his father, and the magnificent dark eyes, the sterling good sense of his mother. "There's no reason to be fidgety over him," Sir Stephen would say; "he'll grow into a strong man in time." But Lady Oakburn was fidgety in that one particular, and Sir Stephen had this year ordered the boy to Seaford. Sir Stephen had no conception that the mandate would be a particularly welcome one to his son and Lucy Chesney; Lady Oakburn had as little; for they had been utterly blind to the

attachment that was taking root under, as may be said, their very noses.

He went up to her, holding out his hand, and her cheeks wore their loveliest carmine as he bent to her with his whispered words. Very commonplace words though, and there was no apparent necessity for the blushes, or for his sweet, low tones. Their love-making had not yet gone on to open avowal.

"You told me you were not coming here to-day, Lucy."

"I thought we were not. Mamma said it would be too hot, but she changed her mind. We had a note from Sir Stephen this morning."

"Ah! What about?"

"He has obtained the information for us regarding those German baths. It is very favourable, and mamma says now she wishes she had gone to them instead of coming to Seaford."

An interchanged glance from between their eyelashes, shy on Lucy's part, speaking worlds on his, and Lucy's eyes at least were dropped again. Lady Oakburn's going to the German baths instead of to Seaford would not have been agreeable to either.

"But, as Lady Oakburn is here, I suppose she will remain?" he said.

"I think so, now. It is only July, you know, and there may be time for Germany later. Mamma says we must remain a month, for she has written to ask Jane to come to us. At least, we must remain if Jane accepts the invitation."

"I hope she will do so!" involuntarily exclaimed Frederick. "Did Sir Stephen say whether he should come down on Saturday, do you know, Lucy?"

"I cannot tell. I did not read his letter. Mamma read it aloud to me, but I don't know whether she read all. Sir Stephen——"

"Mr. Frederick Grey, Helen bade me ask whether you had forgotten that she is waiting? She says perhaps it is inconvenient to you to keep your promise."

Frederick Grey turned to behold a young girl of ten, Helen Vaughan's sister. Helen Vaughan had watched the speakers with a resentful spirit and a jealous eye. It was more than her chafed temper could bear, and she called her sister from the attractions of the sand castles, and gave her the message, following herself slowly on the heels of the little girl. As Frederick looked round, she had almost come up to them. The child flew off to the castles again, and Helen spoke.

"It may be inconvenient to you now, Mr. Grey?"

"By no means. I shall be happy to accompany you."

The two young ladies stood, scanning each other's faces, waiting —as it seemed to him—for an introduction. He knew that Miss

Vaughan's position, as the daughter of a general officer, would justify his making it to Lucy.

"Miss Vaughan: Lady Lucy Chesney."

Two cold distant curtsies, and the ceremony was over. The general's daughter was the first to speak.

"Not Miss Vaughan; Miss Helen Vaughan. I have an elder sister. Her health was indifferent, and she stayed behind us at Montreal to come home later."

Montreal? Vaughan? The names struck some almost forgotten chord in the memory of Lucy, in connection with a Miss Beauchamp who had gone out to Montreal as governess, and who turned out not to be Clarice. She made no comment, however, no inquiry; the young lady's haughty face did not take her fancy. Neither perhaps did her intimacy with Frederick Grey.

A few interchanged words, cold and civil, two more distant curtsies, and the young ladies had parted: and Miss Vaughan was walking in the direction of the town, side by side with Frederick Grey.

"I don't like her a bit," thought Lucy, as she turned away. "I wonder how long Frederick has known her?"

In a quiet spot, apart from others, sat Lady Oakburn. The seven years had passed over her face lightly; and she looked almost as young,—more magnificent than when, as Miss Lethwait, the captivated earl had asked her to become his wife. A hazardous venture, perhaps, but one that had turned out well. Lady Oakburn was a step-mother in a thousand. Seated by her side, having rushed up to claim acquaintance with her on hearing Frederick Grey's announcement, was a Mrs. Delcie. The acquaintance between them was very slight. They had met once or twice in some of the crowded rooms in London; but you know it is not all who have the chance of showing to their sea-bathing friends that they are on speaking terms with a countess. Mrs. Delcie appeared inclined to make herself at home, and was already initiating Lady Oakburn into the politics of the place.

"You look tired, my dear child," exclaimed Lady Oakburn, when Lucy came up. "It is hot here. Would you rather go home?"

"I am not at all tired, mamma. But I think Frank will be tired, by the way he is running about."

"It will do him good," returned Lady Oakburn. "You know what Sir Stephen says—that we wrap him up in lavender."

"Is that Sir Stephen Grey?" interposed Mrs. Delcie. "You know the Greys personally, perhaps?"

"Very well, indeed," replied Lady Oakburn.

"I don't. But I should like to do so. I must get an introduction to Lady Grey. What a handsome young fellow is that son of theirs! *He* will not get away from Seaford heart-whole."

The words were spoken emphatically, and Lady Oakburn looked up with some curiosity. Lucy, who had sat down by her step-mother, bent her face and her parasol, and began her favourite pastime of tracing characters on the sands as she listened.

"That handsome girl, Helen Vaughan, has been making a dead set at him ever since he came here, and he does not respond to it unwillingly," continued Mrs. Delcie. "Some think that they are already engaged: but I don't know."

"I do not think that likely," observed Lady Oakburn.

"Why?"

"From what I know of Frederick Grey, he is not the man to choose a young lady for a wife, after knowing her for a fortnight only."

"You would think it likely if you saw them together. He is ever with her, evidently smitten; on the sands, on the promenade, in the rooms, there he is by the side of Helen Vaughan. Some fancy his profession might be a bar in the general's eyes; not it, say I: there's the baronetcy to set off against it. It is to be hoped he will have her, for she's dying for him."

Lucy's face turned white, and the parasol went scoring its marks according to its own will. *Was* it true, this? For the last few months she had been living as in a dream of Eden: one that she had not cared to analyze. All she knew was, that the step of Frederick Grey sent her whole life-blood coursing through her veins, that his presence brought rapture to her; his voice was sweeter than the sweetest music, the touch of his hand thrilled her every fibre. The sunny spring-tide of love had come for Lucy Chesney, and she had been glad that it should never pass.

> Love took up the glass of Time and turned it in his glowing hands
> Every moment, lightly shaken, ran itself in golden sands.
> Love took up the harp of Life, and smote on all its cords with might;
> Smote the chord of Self, that, trembling, passed in music out of sight.

CHAPTER II.

CHANGES.

Lady Jane Chesney sat in her quiet drawing-room in the old house on the Rise. The Rise was an important suburb now; mansions, and villas with two entrance-gates, and dwellings with miniature lodges, and other grandeur, had sprung up. Seven years make changes in a place.

They had not made much in Jane Chesney. The former care, the disappointment, the trouble had passed; and these later peaceful years of quiet had smoothed her fair countenance instead of

ageing it. One source of care alone was hers; and that had grown into a care of the past—the anxiety touching her sister Clarice. Strange as it may seem to have to write it, strange as it *was* in fact, nothing whatever had been heard of Lady Clarice Chesney. Not so much as a word, a hint, a sign of her had come to Jane in any way during the past seven years. Even Mrs. West—the only link as it had seemed to Lady Jane between Clarice in being and Clarice lost—had disappeared. Not disappeared in the sense that Clarice had disappeared. Mrs. West had given up her house in Gloucester Terrace and gone to reside on the Continent for the benefit of her children's education. Her husband went with her. A successful man in business, he had realized a competency earlier than most men realize it, and had (perhaps wisely) retired from it altogether. So that Jane had seen nothing of the Wests since that short interview with Mr. West at the period of Lord Oakburn's death.

No; Clarice Chesney remained lost; her fate a mystery amidst the many mysteries of life; and time had spread its healing wings over the heart of Jane, and anxiety and sorrow were now all of the past. It is true that moments of dismay would come over Jane, like unto that first waking of ours in the early morning, when all the old horror would return to her; the strange disappearance, the vivid features of the dreaded dream, the wearing suspense when she and the earl were afterwards searching for Clarice: and she would remember how faithfully she had promised her father to make Clarice the one chief object of her life. In these moments she would ask herself—was she doing so? But in truth she saw not anything that *could* be done, for all sources of inquiry had been exhausted at the time. Should any clue ever turn up, though it were but of the faintest, then Jane would act; act with all her best energy, and strive to unravel it. A voice within her sometimes made itself heard, whispering that that time would come.

But the seven years had gone on, bringing none; and seven years at Lady Jane Chesney's age seems a long span in the lease of life. The signs of care had left her face; it was placid and gentle; and existence in a calm, quiet way had yet charms for Jane Chesney.

Not that little temporary worries never intruded themselves. I do not know any one to whom they do not come. Even this very morning something of the sort is troubling Jane as she sits in her cool and shaded drawing-room, where the sun does not penetrate until high noon. A letter has been delivered to her from Seaford from the Countess of Oakburn, and its contents are perplexing her, as her fair brow bends over it for about the twentieth time.

Lady Oakburn had written to her some days previously, inviting her to come and stay with them at Seaford. Jane declined it. She did not feel inclined to go from home just then, she wrote; but per-

haps, if all went well, she would spend Christmas with them in London. Jane's former antipathy to the countess had worn away: she truly esteemed her, and they were the best of friends. Her refusal was duly despatched, and a few days passed on. But this morning had brought another letter from the countess, containing a few urgent lines of entreaty. "Do come to me at once, dear Lady Jane. I ask you for Lucy's sake. She is quite well; but I must have some advice from you respecting her."

The words puzzled Jane. Lady Oakburn had written in evident anxiety; in—Jane thought—pain; certainly in haste. Her letters were always so sensible and self-possessed that there could be no doubt something unusual had seriously disturbed her, and that it concerned Lucy.

"I must go," decided Jane, as she folded the letter for the last time, and placed it in her pocket. "I do not like suspense, and I shall go to-day. We can get away by the three-o'clock train."

She rang for Judith, to give her necessary orders, and in the same moment saw the carriage of her sister Laura stopping at the gate. A grand carriage was Lady Laura's now, with its bedecked servants and all sorts of show and frippery attached to it, quite after Laura's own vain heart. Mr. Carlton the elder had quitted the world, and bequeathed his gains to his son; and none in all South Wennock were so grand as Mr. and Lady Laura Carlton.

She came in: the imperious look, which had now grown habitual, very conspicuous on her face; her robe of pale green morning silk rustling and glistening, her white Chantilly veil flung back. Jane could see in a moment that something had crossed her. Something often did cross her now. The sisters were not very intimate. Jane maintained her original resolution, never to enter Mr. Carlton's house; and her intercourse with her sister was confined to these visits of Laura's. Laura sat down upon the nearest chair, flinging her dainty lace parasol upon the table.

"Jane, I wish to goodness you'd let me have Judith!"

The words were spoken without any superfluous ceremony of greeting. When Laura was put out, she was as sparing of courtesy as ever had been the sailor-earl, her father. Jane looked at her in surprise.

"Let you have Judith, Laura! I don't know what you mean."

"Stiffing has nearly driven me wild this morning with her stupidity," returned Lady Laura, alluding to her maid; "and if I could only get some one in her place to suit me, she should go this very day. Would you believe, Jane, would you *believe*, that she has gone and sent that lovely gold-coloured scarf of mine to the dyer's?"

"She must have done it in mistake," observed Jane.

"But, good gracious who but an idiot would make such a mis-

take?" retorted Laura. "I told her to send my brown scarf to be dyed, and she says she thought I meant my gold one, and it has come home this morning converted into a wretched black thing! I could have beaten her in my vexation. I wish you'd spare me Judith, Jane. She would suit me, I know, better than any one else."

Jane shook her head. Perhaps she admired the coolness of the request. She said very little; but that little was to the effect that she could not spare Judith, and Laura saw she meant it.

"Don't part with a maid who suits you in other ways for one single error, Laura," was her advice. "At any rate, I cannot give you Judith. I am going to take her away with me this very day. I am going to Seaford."

"To Seaford!" returned Laura, speaking as crossly as she felt. "Why, it was only last week when I met you in High Street you told me Lady Oakburn had invited you to Seaford, and you had declined to go."

"I know I did. But I have had another letter from her this morning, and have altered my mind. I shall go to-day."

Laura gave her head a toss in her old fashion. "I wouldn't be as changeable as you, Jane, for anything. Then you won't give me Judith?"

"I am very sorry to refuse you, Laura," was Jane's answer, "but I could not do without her."

Laura sat tapping the carpet with her foot. "I have a great mind to go with you," said she at length. "I am sure Lady Oakburn would be glad to see me."

"But I shall stay there a month."

"What of that?"

"Mr. Carlton might not like to spare you so long."

"Do you suppose I study what he likes?" asked Laura, a bitterly supercilious scowl crossing her face. "But I won't go: I should miss the races here."

For South Wennock was a gay place now, and held its own yearly races, at which few people enjoyed themselves more than Lady Laura Carlton. These races brought to them some of the good county families, and Laura was in her element, keeping open house. She rose, saying a cold adieu to Jane. She was capricious as the wind, and swept out to her carriage with pouting lips.

From that one little remark above of my Lady Laura's, the reader will infer that the sunshine formerly brightening the domestic life of Mr. Carlton and his wife, had not continued to illumine it. Things might have been happier with Laura perhaps had she had children; but since that first infant, which had died at its birth, there had been no signs of any. Happier, in so far as that she would have had occupation; a legitimate interest to fill her thoughts;

but it might not have made any difference to the terms on which she now lived with her husband. And the terms were not, on the whole, those of harmony.

The original fault was his. However haughty, sullen, passionate Laura might have become; however aggravating in her manner to him as she often now was, let it emphatically be repeated that the fault lay originally with him. It was only a repetition of the story too often enacted in real life, though not so often disclosed to the world. Laura had loved Mr. Carlton with impassioned fervour; she had so continued to love him for three or four years; and then she was rudely awakened. Not awakened by the gradual process of disenchantment, but suddenly, violently, at one fell stroke.

It is the *spécialité* of man to be fickle; it is the *spécialité* of some men to stoop to sin. Perhaps few men living were more inclined by nature to transgress social laws than was Mr. Carlton. He had been lax in his notions of morality all his life; he was lax still. His love for his wife had been wild and passionate as a whirlwind; but these whirlwinds, you know, never last. Certain rumours reflecting on Mr. Carlton were whispered about; escapades now and again, in which there was, it must be confessed, as much truth as scandal, and they unfortunately reached the ears of his wife. The town ignored them of course: was obligingly willing to ignore them; Lady Laura did not do so. She contrived to acquire pretty good proof of their foundation, and they turned her love for her husband into something very like hatred. It has had the same effect, you may be aware, in other lives. Since then she had been unequal in her temper. The first burst of the storm over, the cruel shock in some degree lived down, she had subsided into an indifferent sort of civility: but this calm was occasionally varied by bursts of passionate anger, not in the least agreeable to Mr. Carlton. Personally he was loving and indulgent to Laura still. No open rupture had taken place to cause a nine days' marvel. Before the world they were as cordial with each other as are most husbands and wives; but Laura Carlton was an unhappy woman, looking upon herself as one miserably outraged, miserably deceived. Little wonder was there at the remark to her sister: "Do you suppose I should study what he likes?"

Lady Jane, attended by her faithful maid, drove to Great Wennock to take one of the afternoon trains. The road was another thing that had been changed by the hand of Time. The old ruts and hillocks and stones had disappeared, and now all was smooth as a bowling-green. As they entered the waiting-room, the omnibus renowned in this history, which still plied between the two towns, and now boasted of a rather more civil driver, and of new springs and of sundry other embellishments, was drawn up in its

place outside, waiting for passengers from the coming train. Had Lady Jane and Judith turned their eyes to it in passing—which they did not do—they might have seen seated in it a remarkably stout lady. It was an old acquaintance of ours, Mrs. Pepperfly. She had been on an errand to Great Wennock, and was taking advantage of the omnibus to return.

The train came up. It set down those of its passengers who wished to alight, and took up those who wished to go on by it. Amidst the latter were Lady Jane and Judith.

Mrs. Pepperfly had been enjoying a good dinner, including a liberal supply of beer. The result was, that she felt drowsy. She was alone in the omnibus, and she sat nodding and blinking, when a slight stir at the door aroused her.

A passenger from the train had come up to take her place in the omnibus. She was a hard-featured, respectable-looking woman, dressed in widow's mourning, and she had with her a little boy and some luggage. She took her seat opposite Mrs. Pepperfly, and placed the child by her side: a delicate looking lad of perhaps six years, with a fair skin and light flaxen hair. Mrs. Pepperfly, skilled in looks, detected at once that he was not in good health. But he was more restless than are most sickly children, turning his head about from the door to the window incessantly as different objects attracted his attention.

"Oh, mother, mother, look there!"

The words were spoken in the most excited manner. Two soldiers in their red coats had come from the station; and these had caused the exclamation. The mother administered a reprimand.

"There you go again! I never saw such a child! One would think soldiers were a world's wonder, by the fever you put yourself into at sight of them!"

"I have knowed some children go a'most wild at sight of a red-coat!" interposed Mrs. Pepperfly without ceremony.

"Then he's one of them," replied the widow. "He'd rather look at a soldier any day than at a penny peep-show."

The omnibus started, having waited in vain for other passengers. The little boy, probably seeing nothing in the road, or the fields on either side of it, to attract his admiration, nestled against his mother and was soon asleep. Mrs. Pepperfly had also begun to nod again, when the stranger bent over to her with a question.

"Do you happen to know a lady living about here of the name of Crane?"

Mrs. Pepperfly started and opened her eyes, hardly awake yet.

"Crane?" said she.

"I want to find the address of a lady of that name. Do you know a Mrs. Crane in South Wennock?"

"No, mum," answered Mrs. Pepperfly, her reminiscences of a certain episode of the past aroused, and not pleasantly, at the question. "I never knowed but one lady o' that name; and that was but for two or three days, eight year and more ago, for she went out of the world promiscous."

The widow paused a minute as if she had lost her breath. "How do you mean?" she asked.

"She was ill, mum, and I was the very nurse that was nursing of her, and she was getting on beautiful when a nasty accident, which haven't been brought to light yet, put her into her grave in St. Mark's Churchyard."

"Was she hurt?" exclaimed the widow, hastily.

"No, nothing of that," answered Mrs. Pepperfly, shaking her head. "The wrong medicine was given to her. It was me myself what poured it out and put it to her dear lips, little thinking I was giving her her death. And I wish my fingers had been cut off first!"

The stranger stared hard at Mrs. Pepperfly, as if she could not understand the words, or as if she doubted the tale. "Where did this happen?" she said at length. "Was she in lodgings in South Wennock?"

"She were in lodgings in Palace Street," was the reply. "She come all sudden to the place, knowing nobody and nobody knowing her, just as one would suppose a strange bird might drop from the skies. And she took the Widow Gould's rooms in Palace Street, and that very night her illness come on, and it was me that was called in to nurse her."

"And is she *dead?*" repeated the stranger, apparently unable to take in the tidings.

"She have been lying ever since in a corner of St. Mark's Churchyard. She died the following Monday night. Leastways she was killed," added Mrs. Pepperfly.

The stranger altered the position of the sleeping child, and bent nearer to the nurse. "Tell me about it," she said.

"It's soon told," was the answer. "The doctor had sent in a composing draught. He had sent one in on the Saturday night and on the Sunday night; she were restless, poor thing, though doing as well as it's possible for a body to do; but she were young, and she would get laughing and talking, and the doctors they don't like that —and I'll not say but there's cases where it's dangerous. Well, on the Monday night there was sent in another of these sleeping draughts, as the doctor thought, and as we thought, and I gave it to her. It turned out to be poison, and her poor innocent soul went out after swallowing it; and mine a'most went out too with the fright."

"Poison!"

"The draught was poisoned, and it killed her."

"But how came the doctor to send a poisoned draught?" asked the stranger in passionate tones.

"Ah, there it is," returned Mrs. Pepperfly. "He says he didn't send it so—that it went out from him good wholesome physic. But, as me and the Widow Gould remarked to each other at the time, if he sent it out pure, what should bring the poison in it afterwards?"

"What was done to the doctor?"

"Nothing. There was an inquest sat upon her body, as I've cause to remember, for they had me up at it: but the jury and the crowner thought the doctor had not made the mistake nor put the poison into the draught—which he had stood to it from the first he hadn't."

"Then who did put it in?"

"It's more than I can tell," replied Mrs. Pepperfly. "I know I didn't."

"And was no stir made about it?" continued the stranger, wiping her face, which was growing heated.

"Plenty of stir, for that matter, but nothing come of it. The police couldn't follow it up proper, for they didn't know where she came from, or even what her crissen name was: and nobody has never come to inquire after her from that day to this."

"Who was the doctor that attended her?" was the next question; and it was put abruptly.

"Mr. Stephen Grey. One might say indeed that two was attending her; him and Mr. Carlton: but Mr. Carlton only saw her once or twice; he was away from the town. She had Mr. Stephen Grey throughout, and it was him that sent the draught."

"Does he bear a good character?" asked the stranger harshly.

Mrs. Pepperfly opened her eyes. "What, Mr. Stephen Grey? Why, mum, nobody never bore a better character in this world, whether as doctor or man. Except that mistake—if it was him that made it—he never had a thing whispered against him before or since. He left the place after that to settle in London, and he has got on, they say, like a house a-fire. I know this: he'd give his right hand to find out the rights about it."

"Is he a young man—an unmarried man?"

"Be you and me young and unmarried?" retorted Mrs. Pepperfly; for the want of sense in the question (as it sounded to her in her superior knowledge) excited her ire. "Him? He have been married this five-and-twenty year, and he's a'most as old as we be. There! There's the very churchyard where she's lying."

Mrs. Pepperfly pointed to the opposite side of the street which they were now approaching. And the stranger, in her eagerness to look at the churchyard, found her face brought violently into contact with the omnibus, as it was whirled round the corner by the driver, to draw up at the door of the Red Lion.

CHAPTER III.

RIVALRY.

WAS it a scene of enchantment?—such as those we read of in the Arabian Nights? The assembly-rooms, garlanded with flowers, brilliant with light, decorated with mirrors and beautiful statues, were thrown open to the terraces, that, redolent with perfume, reposed so calmly in the moonlight. If only from the force of contrast, the scene would have told upon the heart and senses. The garish rooms, hot, noisy, turbulent in their gaiety; the calm cool night, lying clear and still under the dark blue heavens. Fairy forms were flitting in the rooms, measured strains of music charmed the ear; hearts were beating, pulses quickening. Care, in that one dizzy spot, seemed to have left the world.

These Seaford assembly-rooms were gay for that one night. A fête in aid of some local charity had been projected, and the chief names amidst the visitors at Seaford appeared as patrons of it. The Right Honourable the Countess of Oakburn headed the list, and amidst the rest might be read those of Lieutenant-General and Mrs. Vaughan. The Vaughans and the Oakburns had become acquainted. General Vaughan's eldest son had joined the family at Seaford, and he remembered his one night's introduction years before to Lord Oakburn's house. Lady Grey and Mrs. Vaughan were also intimate—the intimacy, formed at watering-places, warm while it lasts, but ceasing when the sojourn is over. So Lucy Chesney and Miss Helen Vaughan had been brought into repeated contact, and—if the truth must be told—were desperately jealous of each other. Lucy heard the rumours obtaining in Seaford—that Mr. Frederick Grey was "in love" with Helen Vaughan. She looked around her and saw, or thought she saw, many things to confirm it. That Frederick Grey was the one object of attraction to half the young ladies staying at Seaford could not be disputed; the greater part of his time was spent with them without any seeking of his own. *They sought him.* They laid their pretty little plans to meet him, to form engagements with him, to keep him at their side. In the morning lounge, on the sands, in the walk, in the afternoon's ride or drive, in some of the réunions of the night, there would he be with one or other of them. More especially would he be with Helen Vaughan. Do not fancy that he disliked it, although it was more the fault of the young ladies than his own; Frederick Grey was no more insensible to the charms of pretty girls than are other men.

And Lucy saw all this; saw it with the bitterest pain, with keen resentment. It might be, that things looked a great deal worse to her than they would have appeared to unprejudiced eyes, for jealousy, you remember, makes the food it feeds upon. He had not spoken to her; he had not told her that he loved; and Lucy may be excused if she took up the idea that he never had loved her; that the sweet consciousness recently filling her heart, had been altogether a mistake; and at the thought her cheeks tingled with shame.

Frederick Grey himself assisted the delusion. Lucy's manner had so altered towards him, had become so unaccountably cold and haughty, that he avoided her in very resentment.

Ah, who knew?—the subtle intricacies of this heart of ours are so cunningly profound!—it might be that this attention to other demoiselles, this apparent flirting and love-making—was done only to tease Lucy Chesney, and bring back her allegiance to him. In the midst of it all, Lady Oakburn had become acquainted with the state of affairs. By the merest accident, her eyes, so long closed, were suddenly opened, and she saw that Lucy loved Frederick Grey. She had little doubt but that he returned the love; she as little doubted that the passion was of some standing. There occurred to her dismayed memory the intimacy that had subsisted between them all in town; the interviews without number, in which he could have made love to Lucy had he chosen so to do.

The countess sat down in consternation. She liked Frederick Grey herself more than any one she knew; but what of Lady Jane? Would *she* deem him a suitable *parti* for Lucy? Would she not rather condemn him as altogether ineligible?—and how should she herself answer to Lady Jane for her care of Lucy? Care?—as applied to love? Lady Oakburn in her self-condemnation forgot that the one is rarely a preventive to the other. She did the best that she could do. In her straightforward way she wrote that hasty letter summoning Lady Jane; Lucy meanwhile remaining ignorant of the discovery and its results. Lucy had enough on her heart just then, if not on her hands, in seeking fresh cause for her new jealousy.

It was not an ordinary evening at ordinary seaside gala-rooms, but a fête for which the rooms had for once been lent, and to which every one of note had flocked, not only of the seaside visitors, but of the local society. Much had been made of it; and the arrangements were of that complete nature not often seen. You may be very sure the ladies' toilettes equalled the rest in attraction.

Lady Oakburn and Lucy arrived late. So late indeed that Miss Helen Vaughan was saying to herself they certainly would not come at all. The little Earl of Oakburn was with them. The little earl was indulged a great deal more than was good for him, especially

by Lucy, and his mamma had yielded to the young gentleman's demand to "go to the ball," upon condition that when he had taken a twenty-minutes' peep at it, he should retire quietly and be conveyed home by Pompey. Their delay in coming to the ball was caused by the anticipated arrival of Lady Jane. Jane had telegraphed to the countess that she was on her road to them, and they had waited to receive her. But it grew late, and she had not come.

As Lucy entered the rooms, her eyes were dazzled for a moment by the blaze of light, and then they were cast around in search of—what? Exactly in search of what she saw, and nothing less; of what her jealous heart had pictured. Whirling in the mazy waltz, to the measured strains of a military band, his arm encircling her waist, his hand clasping hers, his eyes bent upon her with admiration, or what looked like it, his voice lowered to whispered tones, were Frederick Grey and Helen Vaughan. A pang, almost as of death, shot through Lucy's heart, and she shivered in her excess of pain.

Helen Vaughan looked well. She always did look so. Tall, regal, stately, fair; a fitting companion for the distinguished Frederick Grey—and many were thinking so. But what was her beauty, compared with that of Lucy Chesney?—with her retiring grace, her exquisite features, her pure, damask complexion, her sweet brown eyes? Both were dressed in white; robes soft, flowing, fleecy as a cloud. Miss Vaughan displayed an elaborate set of ornaments, emeralds set in much gold; Lucy, in better taste, wore only pearls. Both looked very, very beautiful, and the room thought so. Helen Vaughan was praised in words, but a murmur of hushed admiration followed in Lucy Chesney's wake.

The waltz was over, and Frederick Grey made his way to Lucy. She affected not to see him. Her head was turned from him, and she was talking volubly to Fanny Darlington. He had to touch her at length to obtain attention.

"Oh, I beg your pardon," she coldly said. "Good evening."

"How late you are, Lucy! The dance for which you were engaged to me is over."

"I supposed it would be," she said in her bitter resentment. "I told you at the time I promised that it was more than I should probably be able to perform."

"You will dance the next with me. I think it is the Lancers."

Was she deaf? She made no reply, and her head was again turned from him. At that moment, a gentleman was brought up and introduced to her; a little man who looked as if he had not two ideas in his head, with an eye-glass stuck artistically in his eye, and his sandy hair parted down the middle. She did not catch his name; it was Viscount Somebody, one of the county notabilities; but she put her

hand within his arm when he solicited the honour of it for the forthcoming quadrille, and was moving away with him.

Mr. Frederick Grey's blood boiled up, dyeing his brow crimson. He laid his hand on Lucy's arm to detain her.

"*I* asked you first, Lucy."

She recoiled from the touch. "I beg your pardon, did you speak to me?"

"I asked you for this quadrille. I consider you engaged to me for it."

"If you are anxious to dance, there are plenty of partners"—and her tone stung him with its cold indifference. "Miss Lake, Miss Vaughan, Miss Darlington—they are all waiting for you. Pray choose one of them."

She moved away in her haughty pride. But every pulse in her body was throbbing with pain, every fibre of her heart was sick with love—love for Frederick Grey.

His face flushed with anger, and he stood still for a moment, possibly undecided whether to make a scene and pull the little viscount's nose, or to let it alone. Then he went straight up to Helen Vaughan and asked her for the quadrille. They took their places, *vis-à-vis*, as it happened, to Lucy and the viscount.

Lady Grey was seated between the Countess of Oakburn and Mrs. Delcie. The latter, an inveterate busybody, one of those wretched people who can never let any one else be at peace, her eyes sharp as a needle, her brain active as only a mischief-maker's can be, watched Frederick Grey and Helen Vaughan for some minutes, and then turned to Lady Grey with a whisper.

"Is it a settled thing?" she asked.

"Is what a settled thing?"

"That your son marries Helen Vaughan?"

It was the first time the idea had been presented to Lady Grey. Living much in seclusion, she had seen and known nothing of the doings of the outer world at Seaford. Her heart leaped with a bound of dismay, for she did not like Helen Vaughan.

"Pray do not mention anything so improbable," she faintly said. "My son marry Helen Vaughan! Indeed I hope not!"

"Improbable you call it?" was Mrs. Delcie's answer. "Look at them."

Lady Grey did look. The Lancers were over, and he was taking Helen Vaughan back to her place. He was bending to talk to her, and there was an *empressement* in his manner that she, the mother, did not like. The evening's pleasure had gone out for her.

Back came Lucy, escorted by the viscount, and sat down by Lady Oakburn. The seat next to her was vacant now, and Frederick Grey dropped into it. My Lady Lucy's cheeks grew pale with inward agitation.

"Lucy, what have I done to you?"

"Done?" repeated Lucy in tones of supreme indifference mingled with a dash of surprise. "Nothing."

He bit his lip. "Will you tell me how I have offended you?"

"You have not offended me."

"Then what is the matter with you?"

"What should be the matter with me? Really I do not understand you."

Neither in truth did he understand Lucy. Frederick Grey was not a vain man, and it *never* occurred to him to think that she could be jealous. *He* thought nothing of that foolish dalliance—flirtation—call it what you will—in which his hours were often spent. The society of those pretty girls was pleasant pastime, but nothing more to him. If Miss Vaughan threw herself rather more in his way than the rest did, he never gave it a second thought; and most certainly he never suspected that it was changing the manners of Lucy Chesney towards him. In the days that had elapsed since her arrival at Seaford, he had been at times greatly pained by her behaviour. He had set it down hitherto to some unaccountable caprice: but he now began to think that her feelings to him were changing. And he had felt so sure of her love!

"Lucy, you must know that you are behaving very strangely to me. You heard me ask you for the Lancers, and you deliberately turned and engaged yourself to that little puppy, who is not worth a thought. Will you dance the next with me?"

"Thank you: I do not intend to dance the next. I feel a little tired."

He paused a minute, rose from his seat, and stood before her. "There must be some reason for all this."

"Reason for all what?"

"For your indifference towards me."

"You may think so if you please."

"It looks very like caprice, Lucy."

"Caprice? Oh yes, that is it, no doubt. It is caprice."

"Once for all," he rejoined quite savagely, "will you dance with me or not, Lady Lucy?"

"No, I will not. Thank you all the same."

He turned on his heel. Lucy caught her little brother, who was running up to them.

"I am going home, Lucy," said the child. "Pompey's come, and I am going without being naughty, because I promised I would."

"There's my darling Frank," said Lucy, bending over him. "Wish mamma good night."

He was a brave, honourable little fellow, and he intended to go off blithely with Pompey, whose black face was seen at the door.

The Oakburns were noted for holding a promise sacred; and it seemed that the future chief would be no degenerate descendant. Kissing his mamma, he put up his face to Lady Grey; but that lady was too much engaged to pay attention to him, and the boy ran away without it.

Lady Grey's face was turned to her son. She had beckoned him to her when he was quitting Lucy. Mrs. Delcie had left her seat then, and Frederick halted before it, listening to his mother's whisper.

"Frederick! only one word—to ease my troubled heart. Surely you are not—you are not falling in love with Helen Vaughan!"

"I don't think I am, mother."

The answer was given gaily, lightly. Conscious of that other love so deeply seated in his heart, he could afford to joke at this. But he caught the anxious look in his mother's eyes.

"You would not like her for a daughter-in-law?" he breathed, laughing still.

"I confess that I should not."

"Very well. Be at ease, mother mine. What put such a thing into your head?"

"They say she is in love with you—and that you love her. They are saying she is your chosen wife."

"I am much obliged to them, I'm sure. Who are 'they'?"

"Oh—the room, of course," replied Lady Grey. "The people stopping at Seaford. Frederick——"

"Mr. Grey, do waltz with me, if you are not engaged."

The interruption came from Miss Fanny Darlington. She was quite young, and therefore deemed herself justified in acting as a child or a romp. He was not engaged, he said, and laughed as he took her on his arm.

"When is the wedding to be?" she asked, as they whirled round to the strains of Strauss's music.

"What wedding?"

"As if you did not know! It can mean nothing else, when your attentions are so marked. Mrs. Delcie says she knows for a fact that the general has consented."

"When did she say that?"

"This evening. She was talking to me and Lady Lucy Chesney."

A change came over his features. Was *this* the secret of Lucy's inexplicable conduct—some wretched gossip linking his name with General Vaughan's daughter? All his gaiety seemed to have gone from him, and his tone, as he spoke to Fanny Darlington, changed to earnestness.

"Miss Darlington, will you allow me to remind you—as I most certainly shall Mrs. Delcie—that to speak of Miss Vaughan, or of

any other young lady, in this way, is very unjustifiable. I am certain it would seriously displease her—and it has displeased me."

He went through the rest of the waltz in silence. Miss Darlington grew cross, and asked what had come to him. At its conclusion he looked round for Lucy and could not see her.

Lucy Chesney had left the garish rooms, which accorded ill with her aching heart. In a corner of the terrace, shaded from observation by clustering trees, she stood, leaning over the rails and gazing upon the sloping gardens beneath, lying so cold and still in the summer's night. Cold and still was her own face; cold and still her unhappy heart: its pulses felt as if frozen to stone; its life-blood to have left it. The waltz was over; she could hear that; and she pictured him with her happy rival, whispering sweet vows in her ear. She stood there in her bitter misery, believing that he, whom she so passionately loved, had deserted her for another! The sound of laughter and merriment came from the rooms; the strains of music again floated on the air; fragrant flowers, giving forth their perfume, surrounded her: things all pleasant in themselves, but grating just now on Lucy's heart.

What had become of the old bliss that had made her days seem as a dream of Eden? It had gone. All had changed since their sojourn at Seaford; the joy had left her, the sweet half-consciousness of being beloved had departed, to give place to the bitterest jealousy.

Why did Helen Vaughan so seek him? Why do girls thus seek attractive men?—ay, and men who are not attractive? Perhaps she hoped to win him; perhaps she only thought to while away her idle hours. However it might have been, it brought to Lucy Chesney fruits that seemed bitter as the Dead-Sea fruit. But she had to digest them; and never, never had they been harsher or more cruel than at that moment, as she hung over the terrace in the moonlight.

Her hands were clasped in pain, her forehead was pressed upon the cold iron of the rails, as if its chill could soothe the throbbing pulse within. A cloud of images was in her brain, all bearing the beautiful but dreaded form of Helen Vaughan, and—some one touched her shoulder, and Lucy shivered and looked up.

It was Frederick Grey. What had he come out there for? *He* to see her in the abandonment of her grief!

"Lucy!" he whispered, and the tone of his voice spoke of love if ever tone spoke it. "Lucy, are you ill?"

She would have been glad to fling his hand away, to fly from him, to meet his words with scorn; but she could not: for the heart will be true to itself, and the startled agitation unnerved her. She shook like a leaf.

He gently wound his arms round her, he bent over her and poured forth his tale of love—to be suppressed no longer. He told

her how passionately he had hoped to make her his: that if he had been silent, it was because he feared the time to speak had not come. Lucy, in the revulsion of feeling, burst into tears, and yielded herself up to the moment's fascination.

"Oh, Lucy, how could you suffer this cloud to come between us?" he whispered. "How could you suspect me of faithlessness? My darling, let me speak plainly. We have loved each other, and we both knew it, though it may be that you scarcely acknowledged the fact to yourself; but here, without witness,—save One, who knows how ardently and loyally I will cherish you, under Him—surely we may lift the veil from our dearest feelings! Lucy, I say, we have loved each other."

She did not answer, but she did not lift her face from its shelter on his breast. The moment of rapture, so often shadowed forth in her dreams, had come!

"I was not conscious until ten minutes ago, that my name had been coupled, as it appears it has been, with Helen Vaughan's. Lucy," he resumed, "I swear to you that I have not willingly given cause for it. I swear to you that I have had no love for her, or thought of love. I certainly have been brought much into contact with her, for you have estranged yourself from me since you came here, and the idle hours of this place have hung upon my hands; but I throw my thoughts back and ask how far it has been my fault, and I believe I can truly say"—he paused with a quaint smile—"that I have been more sinned against than sinning. Lucy, when I have been walking by her side, my heart has wished that it was with you: in conversing with her, I have longed for your voice to answer me. Will you forgive me?"

Forgive him? ay. Her heart answered, if words failed her. He bent his face to hers in the hushed night.

"Believe me, Lucy, I love you as few men can love. I picture to myself the future, when you shall be mine; my cherished wife, the guiding-star of my home; my whole hopes, my love, my wishes are centred in you. You will not reject me? My darling, you will not reject me!"

How little likely she was to reject him, he contrived to gather. And the stars shone down upon vows, than which none sweeter or purer had ever been registered.

"Lucy, you will waltz with me now?"

She dried her happy tears; and, as she returned to the room to take her place with him in the dance, she almost laughed. The contrast between that time and this was so great! Miss Helen Vaughan and the little viscount whirled past them, and Frederick darted a saucy glance into Lucy's eyes. It made hers fall on her blushing cheeks.

Lady Jane Chesney had arrived when they reached home. After Lucy had retired for the night, Lady Oakburn opened her mind to Jane; she could not rest until she had told her all—how Frederick and Lucy were in love with each other. Jane at first looked very grave: the Chesney pride was rising in rebellion.

"I could not help it," bewailed the countess in contrition. "I declare to you, Lady Jane, often as Frederick Grey came to us in Portland Place, that I never for a moment thought or suspected that love was arising between him and Lucy. Our intimacy with the Greys, and Sir Stephen's attendance as a medical man, must have blinded me to the truth. I would give the world—should this be displeasing to you—to recall the past."

"Nay, do not blame yourself," said Jane kindly. "It is very probable that I should have seen no further than you. Frederick Grey! It is not the match that Lucy should make."

"In many respects, of course, it is not so."

Jane remained silent, communing with herself, her custom when troubled or perplexed. Presently she looked at Lady Oakburn. "Tell me what your opinion is. What do you think of it all?"

"May I give it freely?"

"Indeed I wish you would," was Jane's answer. "You have Lucy's welfare at heart as much as I have."

"Her welfare and her happiness," emphatically pronounced Lady Oakburn. "And the latter I do fear is now bound up in this young man. With regard to himself, as a suitor for her, there are advantages and disadvantages. Personally he is all that can be desired, and his prospects are good. Sir Stephen must be a rich man, and Frederick will some day be a baronet. On the other hand, there's his profession; and his birth is altogether inferior to Lucy's. And—forgive me for saying it, Lady Jane—the Chesneys are a proud race."

"Tell me what your own decision would be, were it left to you," repeated Jane.

"I should let her marry him."

Jane paused. "I will sleep upon this, Lady Oakburn, and talk with you further in the morning."

And when the morning came, Jane, like a sensible woman, had arrived at a similar decision. The first to run up and greet her as she left her chamber was the little lord. Jane took him upon her knee in the breakfast-room, and turned his face upwards.

"He does not look ill, Lady Oakburn."

"I have no real fears for him," replied the countess. "In a few years I hope he will have become strong. Frank, tell sister Jane what Sir Stephen says."

"Sir Stephen says that mamma and Lucy are too fidgety over me; that if I were a poor little country boy, sent out in the corn-

fields all day long, with only brown bread and milk to eat, I should be all right," cried Frank, looking up to his sister.

Jane smiled, and thought it very probable that Sir Stephen was right.

"Do you know, Jane, what I mean to be when I grow up a big man?" he continued. "I mean to be a sailor."

Jane faintly smiled and shook her head.

"Yes, I do. Mamma says that, if I were the poor little country boy, I might be one; but, as I am Earl of Oakburn, I shall have other duties to perform. But I want to be a sailor. Oh, Jane, I do wish I could be a sailor! When I see the ships here, I long to run through the waves and get to them."

"It is surprising what a taste he has for the sea," murmured the countess to Jane. "He must have inherited it." And poor Jane sighed with sad reminiscences.

Lucy came in. Jane took her hand, and smiled as she gazed at the bright and blushing face.

"And so, Lucy, you have contrived to fall in love without our leave or licence!"

Lucy coloured to the roots of her hair; her eyelids were cast down, and her fingers trembled in the hand of Lady Jane. All signs of true love, and Jane knew them to be so. The Countess of Oakburn approached Jane.

"I know you have felt the separation from Lucy," she said, with emotion. "Had the terms of the will permitted me to have departed from them, Lucy should have been yours. I could not help myself, Lady Jane; but I have tried to make her all you could wish."

"All any one could wish," generously returned Jane, as she took Lady Oakburn's hand. "You have nobly done your part by her. Do it by the boy, Lady Oakburn, and make him worthy of his father. I know you will."

"Helped to do so by a greater Power than mine," murmured the countess, as her eyes filled with tears.

And when Mr. Frederick Grey arrived that day and spoke out—as he did do—he was told that Lucy should be his.

CHAPTER IV.

A TALE FROM MRS. PEPPERFLY.

THE afternoon's sun was shining on South Wennock: shining especially hard and full upon a small cottage standing alone in Blister Lane. More especially did it appear to illumine a stout lady who was seated on a chair, placed halfway down the narrow

path leading from the little entrance gate to the cottage door. Her dress was light, as far as it could be seen for snuff,—and so broad was she, taking up the width of the path and a great deal more, that she looked like a great martello tower, planted there to guard the approach of the cottage against assaulters.

Judith came down the lane. Three or four weeks had passed since the events recorded in the last chapter, and Lady Jane was at South Wennock again. Jane had some poor pensioners in some of the smaller cottages lower down the lane, and the servant's errand this afternoon was connected with them. Judith's eyes fell upon the lady, airing herself in the sun.

"Is it you, Mother Pepperfly! Why, I have not seen you for an age. Well, you don't get thinner."

"I gets dreadful," said Mrs. Pepperfly. "They might take me about in a carivan, and show me off as the fat woman from South Wennock. Particularly if they could invent a decent way of exhibiting the legs. Mine's a sight to be seen, Judith."

Mrs. Pepperfly gingerly lifted her petticoats a little, and Judith saw that the ankles were indeed worthy of an exhibition. "I wonder you don't take exercise," she said.

"Me take exercise!" uttered Mrs. Pepperfly resentfully. "What's the good of talking to a woman of my size about exercise? It a'most kills me to get about when I changes my places. It's my perfession has brought me to it, Judith; always sitting by a bedside, or dandling a babby upon my knees. I haven't been able to take exercise, and, of course, now I'm too fat to do it. But I must be thankful it's no worse, for I retains my appetite, and can eat a famous meal every time it's set afore me."

"I should eat less and leave off beer," said Judith. "Beer's very fattening."

The tears rushed into Mrs. Pepperfly's eyes at the cruel suggestion. "Beer's the very prop and stay of my life," cried she. "Nobody but a barbarian would tell a poor woman that has to sit up o' nights, tending others, to leave off her beer. I never shall leave off my beer, Judith, till it leaves off me."

Judith thought that likely, and did not contest the point.

"I suppose you are nursing somebody up here," she remarked. "Who lives in the cottage? The last time I came by, it wasn't let."

"I ain't nursing nobody," returned Mrs. Pepperfly. "I'm here on a visit. I left my place yesterday, and I expects to be fetched to another in a day or two, and I was invited here to spend the time between."

"Who's the cottage let to?" continued Judith, lowering her voice.

"It's a widder. She ain't at home. She took the opportunity of my being here to get in a store of things she wanted, and she's gone

about it. We haven't nobody to overhear us that you should set on to whisper. I say, wasn't it a curious thing," added Mrs. Pepperfly, dropping her own voice to a whisper in contradiction to what she had just said to Judith. "She came here, it's my firm belief, just to find out the rights and the wrongs about the death of that poor young lady."

"What young lady?"

"Why, that poor creature that the poisoned draught was gave to. She——"

"Who is she? Where does she come from?" interrupted Judith, aroused to interest.

"I'll just tell ye about it," said Mrs. Pepperfly. "But if you go to ask me who she is, and what she is, and where she comes from, I can't tell; for I don't know any more nor the babby that has not yet got its life breath into it. My missis that I nursed last didn't get strong as soon as she ought, so it was settled she should go over to Great Wennock and stop with her relatives, and I went to take her there. It were Mrs. Tupper, the butcher's wife, and the babby died a week old, which I dare say you heered about. We went over on a Tuesday in the omnibus, nigh upon a month now, and it's the first time I'd been in the new omnibus or along the new road, for I'm no traveller, as is well known, which it's beautiful and smooth they both is, and jolts no longer. I took my missis on to her mother's, carrying her parcel of clothes for her, and I had a good dinner with 'em—a lovely shoulder o' mutton and onion sauce, and was helped three times to beer. After that, I goes back to the station, which it's not three minutes' walk, and sits myself in the omnibus agen it started to come home. It were waiting, you see, for the London train. Well, it came in, and there got into the omnibus a widder and a little boy and some luggage, and that was all. She begun talking to me, asking if I knowed any lady living about here of the name of Crane. 'No, mum,' says I, 'I never knowed but one lady o' that name, and I didn't know much of her, for it's eight year ago, and she died promiscous.' 'How do you mean?' says she, snapping me up short, as if she'd lost her breath. Well, Judith, one word led to another, and I told her about the lady's death in Palace Street, she listening to me all the time as if her eyes were coming out of her head with wonder. I never see a body so eager."

"Who is she?" asked Judith.

"I tell ye I don't know. I'm sure o' one thing, though—that she know'd that poor lady, and is come to the place to ferret out what she can about the death."

"How is it that she is living in this cottage?" returned Judith, quite absorbed in the tale.

"I'm coming to it, if you'll let me," answered Mrs. Pepperfly. "I

never see a body interrupt as you do, Judith. We talked on, the widder and me, till we come to South Wennock, and got out at the Red Lion. With that she looks about her, like a person in a quandary, up the street and down the street, and then she stretches out her hand and points. 'That's the way to the house where the lady was lying,' says she. 'And you're right, mum,' says I, 'for it just is.' 'I wonder whether them same lodgings is to let?' says she; 'if so, they'd suit me.' Upon that I telled her, Judith, what everybody knows, that the lodgings was *not* to let, through the Widder Gould keeping the parlours for herself now, having had a income left her, and the new curate occupying of her drawing-room. Well, then, she asked me did I know of a cottage to let, where there was plenty of fresh air about it, her child being poorly. I cast it over in my mind and thought of this—which belongs, you know, to Tupper hisself, and those be his fields at the back where he keeps his beastesses."

"And she took it?"

"She looked at it that same afternoon, and went straight off to Tupper and took it, paying three-pound-ten down for the first quarter's rent, for she said she'd not bother him with no references. Then she asked me where she could buy or hire a bit of second-hand furniture, and I took her off to Knagg the broker's, and she got what she wanted. She invited me to stop with her, but I couldn't, for I had agreed to be at Tupper's to look after the children while his wife was away, and the widder said, then come up to her as soon as I was at liberty. Which I was a day ago, through Tupper's wife returning home hearty. So I come up here, and she has asked me to stop till I'm called out again, which will be in a day or two I expect, and happens to be Knagg's wife—and I thought it uncommon genteel and perlite of her, Judy. And so here I am, enjoying myself in the country air."

"And in the sun also," said Judith. "You'll get your face browner than ever."

"'Tain't often I has the chance of sitting in it out o' doors, so I thought I'd take advantage of it when I could; and I don't care whether I'm brown or white."

"But why do you think the person has come to find out about the young lady?"

"Look here," cried Mother Pepperfly. "I can see as far through a millstone as most folks, and I argue why should she invite me here, a stranger, unless she wanted to get something out of me? Not a blessed minute, Judy, have I been in the cottage, and I got here at two o'clock yesterday, but she has been a questioning me about it. Now it's the draught, and now it's the doctors, and now it's the nurse, and now it's the inquest, till I declare I'm a'most moithered. She wants to know where she can get a old newspaper

with the history of it in, but I can't tell who keeps 'em unless Mrs. Fitch at the Lion do. 'You won't say nothing to nobody, as I've asked you these questions about Mrs. Crane; I've a reason not,' says she to me last night. 'Mum, you may put your faith in me as I won't,' says I."

"And you have gone and told me to-day!" retorted Judith.

"But you are safe, you are, Judy, and won't repeat it, I know. You were one of us with her, too. I thought to myself this morning, 'Now, if I could see Judy Ford, I'd tell her this;' but I wouldn't open my lips to nobody else: and shan't, as the widder has asked me not. To that other widder, Gould, I wouldn't give a hint of it, if it was to save my life. She's such a magpie, it would be over the town the next hour if she got hold of it."

"Does she mean to live here all alone?" returned Judith.

"I suppose so. She has a woman in to clean, and puts out her washing. The child's a sickly little fellow; I don't think he'll make old bones. Come and see him."

Mrs. Pepperfly rose and sailed indoors; Judith followed. Upon a rude sort of bed on the parlour floor: which opened from the kitchen, and *that* opened from the garden, after the manner of cottages: lay a boy asleep; a fair, quiet-looking child, with light flaxen hair falling about his features. Judith looked at him, and looked again; she was struck with his likeness to some one, but could not for the life of her recollect whom.

"He has a white swelling in his knee," said Mrs. Pepperfly. "Leastways, I'm sure it's coming to one."

"A white swelling? Poor little fellow! that's dangerous."

"Kills youngsters nineteen times out of twenty," returned the nurse with professional equanimity.

"How thin and white he is," exclaimed Judith. "How drawn is his forehead! Whenever you see that lined forehead in a child, you may be sure it comes from long-endured pain."

"His mother says he has never been strong. Take a wee drop short, Judy," continued Mrs. Pepperfly insinuatingly, as she produced a small bottle from some unseen receptacle beneath her capacious petticoats.

"Not I," answered Judith. "I'd rather pour it into the garden than down my throat. And I must be off, or I don't know what time I shall get back, and my lady will say I have been gossiping."

Judith proceeded on her way, and executed her commission with Lady Jane's pensioners. As she returned, she saw a stranger seated in the chair Mrs. Pepperfly had occupied, but which was now drawn closer to the cottage in the shade: a respectable-looking widow woman of fifty years. The child lay in her arms still asleep, and Mrs. Pepperfly had disappeared. Could Judith's eyes have

penetrated within the cottage, she would have seen her comfortably stretched in an arm-chair, overcome either by the sun or by strong waters, and fast asleep.

Judith scanned the hard features of the stranger, and remembered them, having probably been assisted thereto by the conversation with the nurse. An impulse prompted her to enter the gate and speak.

"Good afternoon. I think I have seen you before."

The stranger scanned her in turn, but did not recognize her.

"Possibly," she quietly replied. "I don't remember you."

"I was the young woman who was so much with that poor lady, Mrs. Crane, during the few days she lay ill."

Intelligence, happy intelligence, flashed into the stranger's face. "I am glad to see you," she exclaimed. "I wonder you remembered me."

"You are Mrs. Smith, who came down and took away the baby."

"Yes, I am. But now I'd rather it wasn't spoken of, if you'd oblige me. If it got about, I should have the whole parish up here, wanting to know what I can't tell them. And I have another reason besides. Mrs. What's-her-name, the fat nurse, says nothing has been heard as to who the young lady was, and people would be asking me about her. I could not answer them. I have nothing to say; so I'd rather not be questioned."

"Where's the baby?" inquired Judith, believing as little of this as she chose.

"Dead."

"Is it indeed! Well, it was only a little mite. I thought perhaps this was it."

"This is mine," said Mrs. Smith. "And a great sufferer he is, poor thing. He has always been weakly."

"He seems to sleep well," observed Judith.

"That's because he has no sleep at night. Every afternoon he's dead asleep, so I put him down a mattress in the kitchen or parlour or wherever I may happen to be, for he doesn't like to go away from me. Why, if that child had lived, he would have been getting on for nine years old. This, you may see, isn't seven."

"I can't think who he's like," remarked Judith, again looking attentively at the child. "He is the very image of somebody; some face that's familiar to me; but I can't call to mind whose."

"I know nobody he's like when he's asleep," said Mrs. Smith, also regarding the boy. "Asleep and awake, it is not the same face—not a bit; I have often noticed that. It must be the eyes and the expression that make the difference."

"Has he light eyes!" inquired Judith.

"No; dark. But now, do just tell me what you can about that horrible death. Was it a mistake, or was it wilful?"

"That's what people are unable to decide," said Judith.

"That old nurse is not very explicit. She speaks of one doctor and speaks of another, and mixes the two up together. I want to know who really attended her."

"Mr. Stephen Grey had been attending her—he is Sir Stephen Grey now; and Mr. Carlton had seen her once or twice; the night of her death, and the night before it."

"Was she ill enough to have two doctors?"

"Not at all. Mr. Carlton was to have attended her, but when she was taken ill he was away from South Wennock, so the other came for him. Mr. Carlton was to have taken her the next day."

"Were they both married men?"

"Mr. Grey was; had been a long while; and Mr. Carlton married directly after. He married a peer's daughter. But I can't stay to talk now."

"Oh, do stay! I want you to tell me all that passed: you'll make it clearer than that woman. Step in and take a cup of tea with us."

"You might as well ask me to stay for good," returned Judith. "My lady will wonder, as it is, what is keeping me. I'll ask for an hour's leave, and come up another time."

"Just one word before you go, then. I hear of Messrs. Grey and Lycett, and I hear of Mr. Carlton: which would be the most skilful to call in, in case my child gets worse? I am a stranger here, and don't know their reputations."

"I believe they are all clever; all skilful men. I like Mr. Grey best; I am most used to him."

"It doesn't matter much, then, as far as skill goes, which I call in?"

"As far as skill goes, no," replied Judith. And she said good afternoon, and left.

She went home, pondering on the likeness she had traced in the boy's face; she could not recollect who it was he resembled. Her suspicions had been aroused that it might be the same child, in spite of the apparent difference in the age. But, even allowing that Mrs. Smith had deceived her in saying it was not—and Judith did not see why she should deceive her—the fact would not have helped her, since it was certainly not the deceased lady's face that the child's was so like.

But all in a moment, as Judith was entering the gate of Cedar Lodge, a face flashed on her remembrance, and she saw whose it was that the boy's resembled. The fact seemed to frighten her; for she started aside amongst the trees as one who has received a blow. And when she at length went indoors, it was with a perplexed gaze and knitted brow.

CHAPTER V.

MR. CARLTON'S DREAMS.

THERE was a sound of revelry at the Red Lion Inn. A dinner given by the townspeople was taking place there in honour of some national rejoicing. Filling the chair—as the newspapers had it the next day—was Lewis Carlton, Esquire; a great man now amidst his fellow-townsmen. People are taken with show and grandeur; and Mr. Carlton displayed both. He was successful as a medical man, he was rather liked socially; and his wife's rank brought him always a certain consideration. The money he had inherited from his father, together with the proceeds of his own practice, enabled him to live in a style attempted by few in South Wennock. The town talked indeed of undue extravagance; whispers of debt went round: but that was the affair of Mr. Carlton and Lady Laura alone, and was nothing to any one. Certainly there was a wide contrast between the quiet style of living of John Grey and his partner Mr. Lycett, and the costlier style of Mr. Carlton. The partners were prudent men, putting by for their children: Mr. Carlton was not a prudent man as regarded pecuniary matters, and he had no children to put by for. Carriages and horses and servants and entertainments made his house somewhat unlike a medical man's. But the public, I say, are carried away by all this, and Mr. Carlton was just now the most popular resident in all South Wennock.

He had been unanimously selected to take the chair at this very meeting, and had consented to do so. Consented contrary to his usual line of conduct; for Mr. Carlton personally was of a retiring disposition, and declined to be made much of, or to be brought prominently forward. It was the first time he had given a consent to fill any public office whatever. He never would serve as poor-law guardian, or churchwarden, or parish overseer; coroner's mandates could not draw him on a jury; the stewardship at races, at public balls, had alike been thrust upon him, or was sought to be, all in vain. Mr. Carlton, in spite of the pomp and show of his home (and that perhaps was due to his wife, more than to himself), was a retiring man, and would not be drawn out of his shell.

He could hardly have said why he had yielded now, and consented to take the chair at this dinner. Having done so, however, he did not shrink from its duties, and he was proving that incapacity was certainly not the cause of his repeated refusals, for never a better chairman graced a table.

He sat at the head of the board, making his after-dinner speeches, giving out his toasts. His manner was genial, his whole heart seemed in his task, his usually impassive face was lighted up to gaiety. A good-looking man thus, with his well-formed features and gentlemanly figure. Some of the county people were at the table, and nearly all the chief townsmen; one and all applauded him to the skies; and when the chairman's health was proposed, and applause rent the air, it was taken up by the mob outside the curtained windows: "The health of Mr. Carlton! Health and happiness to Mr. Carlton!"

The clock was striking eleven, when the chairman, flushed and heated, came forth. Perhaps none of those gentlemen had ever seen him flushed in their lives before. He was always to them a coldly impassive man, whom nothing could excite. It was not the wine that had done so now; Mr. Carlton, invariably abstemious in that respect, had taken as little as it was possible to take; but the unusual ovation paid to him had warmed his heart and flushed his brow. Several of the guests came out with him, but the greater portion were remaining longer; some of these had to ride home miles, the rest were hastening to their nearer homes. For the most part they were slightly elated, for it had been a very convivial meeting; and they took a demonstrative leave of Mr. Carlton, nearly shaking his hands off, and vowing he was a rare good fellow and must be their chairman always. The crowd of eavesdroppers —ever swayed by the popular feeling of the hour—wound up with a cheer for Mr. Carlton by way of chorus.

He walked along the street towards his home, the cheer echoing in his ears. Such moments had not been frequent in Mr. Carlton's life, and he was a little lifted out of his ordinary self. It was a warm night in that genial season hovering between summer and autumn, and Mr. Carlton raised his hat and bared his brow to the cool night air, as he glanced up at the starry heavens. Whatever cares he might have had, whatever sources of trouble or anxiety—and whether he had any or not was best known to himself; but few of us are without some secret skeleton that we have to keep sacred from the world, however innocent in itself it may be—were all cast to the winds. Mr. Carlton forgot the past and the present in the future; and certain vague aspirings lying at the bottom of his heart were allowed to take a more tangible form than they had ever taken before. When the spirit is excited it imbues things with its own hues: and they are apt to be very brilliant.

"I seem like a god to them," he laughed, alluding to the extravagant homage recently paid him by the townsfolk. "Jove on Olympus never had a warmer ovation. I have become what I never intended to be—a man of note in the place. Any foolish

charge against me—psha! they'd buffet the fellow bringing it. Nevertheless, I shall leave you to your sorrow, my good natives of South Wennock; and I know not why I have remained with you so long. For how many years have I said to myself at waking, morning after morning, that another month should see me take my farewell of the place! And here I am still. Is it that some invisible chain binds me to it—a chain that I cannot break? Why else *do* I stop? Or is it that some latent voice of caution—tush! I don't care for those thoughts to-night."

He broke off, rubbed his brow with his cambric handkerchief, nodded a salutation in response to one given him by a passer-by, and resumed his musings.

"My talents were not made to be hidden under a bushel—and what else is it? a general practitioner in a paltry country town! I came here only as a stepping-stone, never intending to remain; and but for circumstances, to which we are all obliged to be slaves, I should not have remained. I think I have been a fool to stay so long, but I'll leave now. London is the field for me, and I shall go there and take my degree. My reputation will follow me; I shall make use of these county aristocrats to recommend me; I shall aspire to her Majesty's knightly sword upon my shoulder. I may be enrolled, in time, as a baronet of the United Kingdom, and then my lady cannot carp so much at inequality of rank. A proud set, the Chesneys, and my wife the proudest. Yes, I will go to London, and I may rise to the very highest rank permitted to men of physic. *May* rise! I *will* rise; for Lewis Carlton to will a thing is to do it. Look at Stephen Grey! was there ever such luck in this world? And if he could triumph, as he has done, without influential friends to back him, what may I not look to do? I am not sorry that luck has attended Stephen: nay, I am glad that it should be so. I have no enmity towards him; I'd speed him on, myself, if I could. I wish him right well anywhere but in South Wennock—and that he'll never come back to. But I hate his son. I should like to wring his neck for him. So long, however, as the insolent jackanapes behaves himself and does not cross my path—— Why, who are you?"

The question was addressed to a female, and an exceedingly broad female, who stood in the shadow of Mr. Carlton's gate, dropping curtsies, just as he was about to turn into it.

"If it wasn't for the night, sir, you'd know me well enough," was the response. "Pepperfly, at your service, sir."

"Oh, Nurse Pepperfly," returned the surgeon blandly; for somehow he was always bland to Mrs. Pepperfly. "You should stand forward, and let your good-looking face be seen."

"Well, now, you will have your joke, sir," remarked the nurse.

"Says I to the folks wherever I goes, 'If you want a pleasant, safe, good-hearted gentleman, as can bring you through this vale of sicknesses, just send for Dr. Carlton.' And I am only proud, sir, when I happens to be in conjunction with you, that's all; which is not the happy case to-night, though I am here, sir, to ask you to pay a visit perfessionally.

"Where to?" asked Mr. Carlton. "What case is it?"

"It's not a case of life and death, where you need run your legs off in a race again time," luminously proceeded Mrs. Pepperfly. "Whether you goes to-morrow morning, or whether you goes to-morrow afternoon, it'll come to the same, sir, as may be agreeable."

"But where's it to?" repeated Mr. Carlton, for the lady had stopped.

"It's where I've been a-staying, sir, for the last few days: a private visit I've been on, and not perfessional, and she's Mrs. Smith. I'm fetched out to-night, sir, to Mrs. Knagg, Knagg's wife the broker's, and Mrs. Smith says to me, 'Call in at Dr. Carlton's as you passes, and make my dooty to him, and say I've heered of his skill, and ask him to step in at his leisure to-morrow to prescribe for my child.' A white swelling it is in its knee, sir, and t'other knee in the grave, as may be said, for 'twon't be long out of it; and me the last few days as I've been there, a worrying of her to let me come for Dr. Carlton."

There were sundry additions in the above speech, which, in strict regard to truth, might have been omitted. Mr. Carlton, a shrewd man, took them for as much as they were worth. The name Smith had suggested to him but one woman of that name as likely to have had the lady before him on a visit.

"Mrs. Smith's child with a white swelling!" he exclaimed in surprise. "It must have come on pretty quickly. Which of the children is it?"

"Which of the children, sir?" echoed Nurse Pepperfly. "She's got but one. Oh, I see; you be thinking of Mrs. Smith, the cow-keeper's wife. It's not her, sir; it's Mrs. Smith up at Tupper's cottage in Blister Lane."

"I did not know there was a Mrs. Smith at Tupper's cottage," he replied.

"She have not been long in it, sir. She's come fresh to the place, and she have took a fancy to me, which is very sensible of her. She'd be glad if you'd go up some time to-morrow, sir."

"Very well," said Mr. Carlton. "I won't forget."

"Then it's good night to you, sir, and wishing you was a-coming to Mrs. Knaggs's along with me; but it's Mr. Lycett. Which is a safe gentleman too, and nothing to be said against."

She sailed off towards the town, and Mr. Carlton closed his gate, and glanced up at his windows; in some of which lights were visible.

"I wonder whether I shall find Laura in tantrums to-night," he said half audibly.

By which expression the reader must not think that Mr. Carlton was in the habit of visiting those "tantrums" unpleasantly on his wife. If not a strictly faithful husband, he was always—when Laura allowed him to be so—an affectionate one. He loved her still as much as it was in the nature of such a man as Mr. Carlton, disenchanted by time and change of the first fond passion, to love. Had Laura but permitted him, he would have been ever tender to her; and that singular charm which distinguished his manner to all women, where he chose to put it forth, still exercised its spell upon her.

He opened the door with his latch-key, and a footman came forward into the hall and took his master's hat. A civil, simple-mannered rustic, in spite of his fine livery.

"Is Lady Laura in, Jonathan?"

"My lady has been in this half-hour, sir."

Laura was lounging on a sofa in the drawing-room, half asleep. She had very few resources within herself: reading, working, albums, engravings, she was sure to yawn over all; music she had not much cared for of late. To spend half-an-hour alone at night, as she was doing now, was a very penance to Laura Carlton.

She rose up when her husband entered, and the lace mantle she had worn in the carriage returning home, was still upon her shoulders. It fell from them now; and the rich silk dress she wore was displayed, and the gleaming jewels on her neck and arms flashed in the gaslight. She had been to a dinner-party; made up by a lady, whose husband had some motive for not wishing to attend the public dinner at the Lion.

"Well, Laura!" he said pleasantly. "Home, I see."

"Oh, Lewis, it was so stupid!" she exclaimed. "Only fancy it!—two gentlemen and ten ladies. I went to sleep in the carriage coming home, and I have been asleep here, I think. I am glad you have come in."

He sat down on the sofa by her side. She held out her wrist, asking him to unclasp a certain bracelet. Mr. Carlton put the bracelet on the table and kept the hand.

"I scarcely hoped," he said, "to find you back so soon."

"There was nothing to stay for. What could ten women do for themselves? I was so thankful when the carriage came. They made a fuss at my leaving, but I said my head ached. And so it did, with the stupidity. It's dreadfully dull in the country at this season of the year. Everybody's away at the watering-places."

"A town like this is dull at most seasons," remarked Mr. Carlton. "At times I regret that I am tied to it."

Laura passed over the remark without notice, almost without hearing it. The fact of his being "tied" to it was so indisputable, that comment was unnecessary. "The Goughs are going to Scarborough next week," she said. "Heigho!"

The sigh was a weary one. Mr. Carlton turned to her.

"Laura, you know, if you would like to go to any of those places, you have only to say so. If it would do you good, or give you pleasure——"

"I don't think I care about it," she interrupted. "You would not go with me."

"How could I? I am tied here, I say. I wish my practice was a different one!"

"In what way?"

"A physician's—where patients, for the most part, had to come to me. The most wearing life of all is a general practitioner's; and it is the least profitable. Compare my gains here with those of a London physician."

"Leave it, and set up in London," said she.

"I am seriously thinking of doing so."

Laura had spoken carelessly, without meaning, and the answer astonished her excessively. Mr. Carlton explained. His talents were buried in South Wennock, he said, and he was really purposing a change. "You would like London, I think, Laura?"

"Yes, very much," she answered; her vain head filling itself forthwith with sundry gay visions, popularly supposed to be capable of realization in the metropolis only. "But you would never leave South Wennock," she resumed, after a pause.

"Why not?"

"*You* have found attractions in the place, if I have not done so."

A momentary contraction of the brow, smoothed away as instantly, and Mr. Carlton was himself again. Not perfectly conscience clear, he hated above all things these allusions of his wife's; he had thought the old trouble was dying away.

"Laura," he gravely said, "South Wennock has no attractions for me; but the contrary. Should I leave it, I take its only attraction with me—yourself."

She laughed. "It's all very well for you to tell me so."

"I swear it," he said in an earnest, almost a solemn tone, as he bent and laid his hand impressively on her shoulder. "I have no attraction but yourself; whether in South Wennock or in the wide world."

She believed him; she liked him still well enough to wish it. "But, Lewis, it has not always been so, you know."

"I thought my wife promised me, when we were last upon this topic, to let bygones be bygones?"

"Did I? Well, I believe I did; and I *will*. Tell me about your dinner, Lewis. Was it very successful? How did you get on with your speeches?"

He gave her a laughing account of it all, and of the homage paid him. For nearly an hour they remained up, in gay, amicable converse; and when Laura went to rest that night, a vision dawned upon her of a future time when full confidence might be restored between them.

The following day, Mr. Carlton proceeded to keep the appointment at Mrs. Smith's. He called in about eleven o'clock, after visiting his patients on the Rise. He went straight into the cottage without knocking, and there happened to be no one in the room but the child, who was seated in a little chair with some toy-soldiers on his lap, which he was placing in martial array.

"Are you the little fellow——"

So far spoke Mr. Carlton, and there he stopped dead. He had cast his eyes, wondering eyes just then, on the boy's face, and apparently was confounded, or staggered, or something, by what he saw. Did he trace any likeness, as Judith had done? Certain it was, that he stared at the child in undisguised astonishment, and only seemed to recover self-possession when he saw they were not alone, for Mrs. Smith was peeping in from the staircase door.

"I thought I heard a strange voice," quoth she. "Perhaps you are the doctor, who was to call?"

"I am," replied Mr. Carlton.

He eyed her as he spoke almost as keenly as he had done the child. The woman had remarked his earnest gaze at the boy, and feared it was caused by the little one's sickly look.

"He does look ill, I'm afraid," she said. "Is that what you were struck with, sir?"

"No—no," returned Mr. Carlton half abstractedly; "he put me in mind of some one, that was all. What is his name?"

"Smith."

"Where does he come from?"

"Well," returned the woman, who had a blunt, abrupt way of speaking, the result of natural manner, not of intended incivility: "I don't see what that has to do with it, or what it is to anybody in this place, which is strange to me and me to it. But if it's necessary for you to know it, sir, he comes from Scotland, where he has lived all his life. He is my youngest child: the only one I have reared."

"Was he born in Scotland?" asked Mr. Carlton, his eyes still riveted on the child.

"Whether he was born there, or whether he was born in New Zealand doesn't affect the present question," returned the woman,

with a touch of irascibility, for she thought the surgeon had no right to pry into her affairs. "If you don't like to attend my boy, sir, unless you first know the top and bottom of everything, there's no harm done, and I'll send for Mr. Grey."

Mr. Carlton laughed pleasantly at her irritability. He rejoined in courteous tones.

"It guides us very much sometimes to know what sort of a climate our patients have been living in, and whether they were born in it; and our inquiries are not usually attributed to idle curiosity, Mrs. Smith. But, come, let me see his knee."

She undid the wrappings, and Mr. Carlton stooped down for the examination; but still he could not keep his eyes from the boy's face. And yet there was nothing out of common in the face; unless it was in the eyes. Thin, pale, quiet features, with flaxen hair waving over them, were illumined by a pair of large, rich, soft brown eyes, beautiful to look at.

"Do I pain you, my little man?" said Mr. Carlton, as he touched the knee.

"No, sir. This soldier won't stand," he added, holding one out to Mr. Carlton, with the freedom of childhood.

"Won't it? Let me see what's the matter. The foot wants cutting level. "There," he continued, after shaving it with his penknife, "it will stand now."

The boy was enraptured. It had been a defaulter, given to tumbling over from the commencement; and the extraordinary delight that suddenly beamed from his eyes sent a thrill through the senses of the surgeon. But for the woman overlooking him, he could have bent his searching gaze into those eyes for the next half-hour, and never removed it.

"He seems a quiet little fellow."

"Indeed, then, he was a regular little tartar till this illness came on," was Mrs. Smith's reply. "A great deal too fond of showing that he had a will of his own. This has tamed his spirit. Could you form any idea, sir, what can have brought it on? I'm certain that he never had a fall, or any other hurt. But he has never been strong."

"It is a disease that arises from weakness of constitution as well as from injury," replied Mr. Carlton. "Do you purpose residing permanently at South Wennock?"

"That depends upon how far I may feel inclined, sir, and how it may agree with the child," she answered civilly. "I am not tied to any spot."

Mr. Carlton, after a few professional directions, took his departure. As he turned from the lane into the high-road, so absorbed was he in thought, that he did not notice the swift passing of Mr. John Grey

in his gig, until the latter called out to him. The groom pulled up, and Mr. Carlton advanced to the gig. There was not much intimacy between the surgeons, but they often met professionally.

"Lycett is with Knagg's wife," began Mr. Grey, stooping from his gig to say what he had to say. "By what I hear, it appears not unlikely to be a difficult case; if so, he may want your assistance. Shall you be in the way?"

"Yes. Or if I go out, I'll leave word where I may be found."

"That's all right, then," returned Mr. Grey, signing to his groom to go on. "I am called in haste to a shocking accident, five miles away; some men injured by an explosion of gunpowder. Good morning."

The gig sped on; and Mr. Carlton went towards South Wennock, oblivious to all things save one; and that was the face of the child he had just seen.

CHAPTER VI.

A PERPLEXING LIKENESS.

THAT must have been a remarkable child, for the hold its face seemed to take upon people and the consternation it caused was something amazing.

On the afternoon of the above day, it chanced that Lady Jane Chesney and her sister Laura were taking a quiet walk together, an unusual circumstance. Their way led down Blister Lane, for Jane wished to leave a book at the door of one of her pensioners; and in passing the gate of Tupper's cottage, they saw a little boy seated in the garden in a child's chair, some toys lying in his pinafore. His head had fallen back and his hands had dropped; he had sunk into a doze.

His face was full in their view; Lady Laura's glance fell upon it, and she halted.

"Good Heavens!" she uttered. "What an extraordinary likeness!"

"Likeness?" repeated Jane. "Likeness to whom? He looks very pale and sickly. I wonder who they are? Judith said the cottage was let."

"I never saw such a likeness in my life," resumed Lady Laura, quite devouring the face with her eyes. "Don't you see it, Jane?"

"I do not perceive a likeness to any one. To whom do you allude?"

"Then if you don't see it, I will not tell you," was the answer: "but it is certainly plain enough."

They were about to walk on, when a voice was heard within the cottage. "Lewis!"

"Listen," whispered Laura, drawing her sister back.

"Lewis! why, you've never gone and dropped off again. Now I won't have you do it, for you know that if you sleep so much in the day, you can't sleep at night. Come! wake up."

The speaker came forth: a hard-featured woman in a widow's cap. She noticed the ladies standing there.

"The little boy seems ill," remarked Lady Jane.

"He is very poorly, ma'am," was the answer. "He will go to sleep in the afternoon, and then there's good-bye to sleep for the night; and I want to break him of it."

"Invalids are generally drowsy in an afternoon, especially if their night's rest is broken. You are strangers here, I think," added Lady Jane.

"Yes. I've brought him, hoping the country air will do him good. Come, Lewis, wake up," she said, tapping the boy on the arm. "Why, there's all your soldiers running away!"

What with the talking, the tapping, and the soldiers, the boy was fully aroused. He sat up, and fixed his magnificent dark eyes upon the ladies.

"Oh, I see it now," murmured Lady Jane to her sister. "It is an extraordinary likeness; the very self-same eyes."

"Nay," returned Laura in the same low tone, "the eyes are the only feature not like. His eyes were shut when the resemblance struck me."

"Look, look! the very expression she used to wear!" whispered Jane, so intent upon the boy as to have paid no attention to her sister's words.

"*She!*" uttered Laura in accents of wonder. "Why, who are you thinking about, Jane?"

"About Clarice. The boy's likeness to her is remarkable. Whose little boy is this?" quickly added Lady Jane, turning to the woman. "He is so very like a—a—a—friend of mine, a lady."

"He's mine," was the short retort.

Lady Jane gave a sigh of regret, as she always did when she spoke or thought of Clarice; but with the present sigh relief was mingled. She did not ask herself why, though innately conscious of it. "There is no accounting for resemblances," she remarked to the mother, as she bade her good afternoon, and bent her steps onward. Laura followed her: and she cast a haughty, condemning glance upon the woman at parting.

"Jane," began Laura, "I think you are out of your mind. What do you mean by saying the child is like Clarice?"

"Why, you first spoke of the likeness yourself!"

"Not to Clarice. He is not in the least like her."

"Of whom then did you speak?" was the wondering question.

"I shan't say," unceremoniously answered Lady Laura. "Certainly not of Clarice. He is no more like her than he's like me."

"Laura, excepting that boy's and Clarice's, and perhaps Lucy's; but Lucy's are softer; I do not believe there are such eyes in the world, so large and brilliant and sweetly tender. Yours are the same in shape and colour, but not in expression. His likeness to what poor Clarice was is wonderful."

Laura paused, rather staggered at Jane's words.

"I'll go back and look again," said she. She wheeled round, retraced her steps, and stood at the gate a minute talking to the boy, but not deigning to notice the woman. Jane stood by her side in silence, looking at him.

"Well?" said Jane, when they finally turned away.

"I repeat that I cannot trace any resemblance to Clarice. I do trace a great resemblance to some one else, but not in the eyes; and it is not so striking now he is awake, as it was when he was asleep."

"It is very strange!" cried Lady Jane.

"What is strange?"

"It is all strange. The likeness to Clarice is strange; your not seeing the likeness is strange; your detecting a likeness to some one else is strange, as you say you do: and your declining to mention to whom, is strange. Is it to any of our own family, Laura?"

"The Chesneys? Oh no. Jane, you spoke just now of Clarice in the past tense. 'His likeness to what poor Clarice *was*,' it is as though you thought she was no longer living."

"What else am I to think?" returned Jane. "All these years, and no trace of her. My father on his death-bed left me to seek her out, but I have no clue to go upon, and can do nothing, and hear nothing."

"If you feel so sure of her death, you had better take to yourself the three thousand pounds," spoke Laura with a touch of acidity. Having been disinherited was a sore point with her still.

"No," quietly returned Jane, "I shall never take that money. Until we shall be assured beyond doubt of Clarice's death—if she be dead—the money will remain out at interest; and then——"

"What then?" asked Laura, for her sister had stopped.

"We shall see when that time comes," was Jane's somewhat evasive answer. "But for myself I shall touch none of it; I have enough, as it is."

You need not be astonished, my reader, at this difference in the vision of the sisters. It is well known that where one person will see a likeness, another cannot do so. "How greatly that child resembles her father!" will be heard from one; "Nay," speaks another, "how much she resembles her mother!" And both are

fight. Some people see likenesses in form, others in expression. Some will be struck with the wonderful resemblance existing between the members of a family, even before knowing that they are related; others cannot see it or trace it in the least—to them there is no resemblance whatever. You must surely have remarked this in your own experience.

And thus was it with the Ladies Chesney; the one could not see with the eyes of the other. But it was remarkable that both should have detected a resemblance in this strange child, and not to the same person.

Things, in regard to the sick woman, turned out as Mr. Grey had anticipated. In the afternoon a message came to Mr. Carlton from his brother-practitioner, Mr. Lycett, and he hastened to the broker's house. There he found Mrs. Pepperfly in all her glory. To give that lady her due, apart from her graces of person and her proneness to a certain failing, she was a skilful woman, equal to an emergency; and nothing brought out her talent like an emergency, and there was nothing she was so fond of. "A spice of danger puts me on my mettle, and shows folks the stuff I'm made of," was a favourite remark of hers; and Mrs. Pepperfly might thank her stars that it was so, or she would have been allowed to sink into private life long ago.

It was not so much that a second doctor's services were then actually required, as that it was expedient one should be at hand, in case of necessity; consequently, while Mr. Lycett chiefly remained with the sick woman, Mr. Carlton had opportunity for a little chat with Mrs. Pepperfly in an adjoining room. This, however, was enjoyed in snatches, for Mrs. Pepperfly was in and out, from one chamber to another, like a dog in a fair.

"Have you been up there, to Tupper's cottage, sir?" she asked, between whiles.

"I went there this morning. Where do they come from?"

"And ain't it a bad case, sir?" returned Mrs. Pepperfly, ignoring the question.

"I don't think it has been well treated," remarked Mr. Carlton. "Do you know where they come from, or what brings them to South Wennock?"

"She comes from—where was it?—Scotland or Ireland, or some of them outlandish places, I think she said. What she wants in South Wennock is another matter," added Mrs. Pepperfly with a sniff.

The sniff was peculiar, and Mr. Carlton looked at her.

"Have you any idea what does bring her here?" he repeated, his tone slightly authoritative.

"Well, yes, I have my idea, sir, and I may be wrong and I may

be right! Though it don't make no difference to me whether I be or whether I bain't. And I don't suppose you'd care, sir, to hear it, neither."

"Speak on," said Mr. Carlton, half eagerly, half carelessly. "What do you suppose her business is at South Wennock?"

Mrs. Pepperfly dropped her voice to a whisper. "You remember that young lady who came to her death so awful at the Widder Gould's through Mr. Stephen Grey's draught—though indeed, sir, what with the heaps of patients you have had since, and the affair fading out of memory, as it were, you might have forgotten her long ago!"

"What of her?" asked Mr. Carlton, and there was a sound in his voice as though he had lost his breath.

"Well, sir, my belief is just this—that that there widder up at Tupper's has appeared at South Wennock to ferret out what she can about the death, and nothing less."

Mr. Carlton did not reply, but he gazed at Mrs. Pepperfly as eagerly as he had gazed at the suffering boy, and with far more mental perplexity, though it did not show itself on his impassive face.

"How very absurd!" he uttered, after a while.

"Just what I says to myself," responded the woman. "And what good 'll it do her? If we could come at anything certain as to who the poor young lady was, and how the draught were converted into poison, 'twould be some satisfaction; but there ain't none to be gained, as it is. I told the Widder Smith so, with my own lips."

"You have talked to her, then, about it?"

"Talked to her!" ejaculated Nurse Pepperfly. "She haven't let my tongue have a holiday from talking of it, since we two met in the new omnibus."

"The new omnibus!" he repeated. "What do you mean?"

Mrs. Pepperfly liked few things better than gossiping, and she forthwith recounted to Mr. Carlton the history of her meeting with the widow, and the subsequent progress of their acquaintance. Ere it was well concluded, her duties called her into the adjoining chamber.

Mr. Carlton had listened in silence, and now stood, apparently revolving the news. He walked to the window, opened it, thrust his head out into a stifling back-yard, where certainly little air could be found, if that were his motive, and after a while drew it in again.

"Have you mentioned this to any one?" he asked, as the woman reappeared, and something sharp in his tone grated on her ear.

"Never to a blessed soul," protested Mother Pepperfly, conveniently oblivious to all recollection of Judith. "The widder charged me not, sir."

"And I would recommend you not to do so," returned Mr.

Carlton. "I have not forgotten the worry and annoyance the affair caused, if you have. I was besieged with curiosity-mongers by night and by day until it had blown over. They left me no leisure to attend to my own business; and I should be exceedingly sorry to be subjected to a similar annoyance—as I should be, were the affair raked up again. So be silent, as Mrs. Smith tells you. What's *her* motive for wanting silence?" he abruptly added.

"She hasn't give none to me, sir. She hasn't said as she's got a motive, or that she does want to find out anything. But when a person harps everlastingly upon one string, hammering away like a bell and a clapper, one can't help suspecting, sir, that there's a motive at the bottom of it."

"I wonder—who she can be!" he said, musingly pausing in the sentence.

"She's uncommon close about herself," was Mrs. Pepperfly's observation.

Mr. Carlton said no more. Indeed there was not time for it, for he was called to by Mr. Lycett. An hour later he left Mrs. Knagg's, his business there being over.

He reached home, buried in a reverie. The name, Smith, the information now furnished by Nurse Pepperfly, drew him to the not unnatural conclusion that she might be the Mrs. Smith spoken of as having taken away Mrs. Crane's infant; the woman he had himself seen at Great Wennock railway-station. If so, could this be the same child? He had asked the boy's age that morning, and Mrs. Smith replied "six;" and the boy did not in appearance look more than six. That other child, if alive, would be much older; but Mr. Carlton knew that the appearance of children in regard to age is often deceptive.

He entered his surgery, spoke a word or two to his assistant, Mr. Jefferson, mixed up a small phial of medicine with his own hands, and went out again, glancing at his watch. It was then past six, but their dinner-hour was seven.

Near to his own house was a toy-shop, and as Mr. Carlton passed it he saw displayed in the window a certain toy—a soldier beating a drum. By pulling a wire, the arms moved and the drum sounded. He went in, bought it, and carried it away with him.

Walking quickly up the Rise, he soon came to Tupper's cottage. Mrs. Smith was seated in the parlour, darning socks; the little boy sat at the table, chattering and eating his supper, which consisted of cold lamb and bread.

"Well, and how is the little man now?" was Mr. Carlton's salutation as he went in, with a pleasant tone and smile.

Mrs. Smith looked surprised. She had not expected the surgeon to call again that day.

"I have been thinking it might be as well if he took a little tonic medicine, which I did not order him this morning," said that gentleman, producing the bottle from his pocket. "So I brought it myself, as I was coming up here. You will find the directions on the label. Have the other things come?"

"Oh yes, sir; they were here by one o'clock."

"Ah, yes. And so you are eating your supper, my little man! It's rather early for that, isn't it?"

"He gets so hungry about this time," said the mother in tones of apology. "And he is so fond of loin of lamb, that he won't rest if he knows it is in the house. There's his cup of milk on the table."

"As I am here, I may as well look at his knee again, Mrs. Smith," said the surgeon.

She rose from her seat to remove the bandage; but Mr. Carlton preferred to undo it himself.

"It doesn't hurt to-night," cried he.

"That's all right then," said Mr. Carlton. "And now will you tell me your name, my little gentleman, for I have not heard it?"

"It's George, sir," interposed the mother before the child could speak. "It was his father's name."

"George, is it?" repeated Mr. Carlton, as he replaced the bandage. "And where are the soldiers, George?"

"Gone home from drill," was the laughing answer. "That one stands now."

"To be sure it does," said Mr. Carlton. "Have you got one to play the drum to the rest while they are at drill?"

He took the toy from his pocket and displayed it. Nothing could exceed the child's delight at the vision. His eyes sparkled; his pale cheeks flushed a vivid crimson; his little thin hands trembled with eagerness. Mr. Carlton saw what a sensitive nature it was, and felt a pleasure as he resigned the toy.

"You are very kind, sir," exclaimed the widow, her own face lighting up with pleasure. "His fondness for soldiers is something marvellous. I'm sure I don't know any other doctor who would have done so much."

"I saw it as I came by a shop a few minutes ago; and thought it would please him," was the reply of Mr. Carlton. "These poor sick children should have their innocent pleasures gratified when it is possible. Good evening to you, Master George."

The widow followed him into the garden. Perhaps the tender tone of some words in the last sentence had aroused her fears. "Have you a bad opinion of him, sir?" she whispered. "Won't he get well?"

"I'll do my best to get him well," replied Mr. Carlton. "I cannot give you an opinion yet, one way or the other.

He shook hands with her and turned away. Mr. Carlton was affable with all classes of patients, cold and impassive though his usual manners were. But had Mr. Carlton been standing with his face to the road, while he spoke to the woman, he would have seen a lady pass, no doubt to his astonishment, for it was his own wife.

Not more astonished, perhaps, than she was to see him. She was passing the cottage—she best knew for what purpose—and turned her eyes stealthily towards its path. What she had hoped to see was the little boy; what she really did see was her husband, shaking hands with the boy's mother. Laura Carlton, feeling as one guilty, just as some of us may have felt when unexpectedly detected in a mean action, made one bound forward, and crouched close to the hedge, which there took an inward curve.

Had Mr. Carlton been on his way to any other patient up the lane —and many cottages were scattered at this end of it—he must have seen her; but he turned towards South Wennock, and marched away quickly.

Lady Laura came out of hiding. Her cheeks were glowing, her pulses were beating. Not altogether with the thought of the detection she had escaped: there was another feeling also. Conscience makes cowards of us all, you know,—often very foolish cowards. It would have been so very easy for Laura, had her husband seen her, to be doing just what she was doing, and nothing else—taking a walk down Blister Lane. She had a right to do so as well as other people had. It was a cool, shady, very pleasant lane, and Laura Carlton, of all people, might be supposed to cling to it from past associations —for was it not the trysting-place that long-ago evening, when she had stolen out to meet and run away with him, now her husband?

Mr. Carlton went safely beyond sight, and Laura began to retrace her steps. Standing on one leg on the low wooden gate was the little child, his new toy in his left hand. He had come limping out to look after his benefactor, Mr. Carlton. The mother had gone indoors again. Laura halted. She gazed at him for quite two minutes, saying nothing; and the boy, who had little of that timid shyness which usually attends sensitive children, looked up at her in return.

"What's your name?" began Laura.

"Lewis."

"What's your mother's name?"

"Smith."

"Is *that* your mother?—the—the—person who was out here a minute ago?"

"Yes," replied the boy.

Laura's face darkened. "How many brothers and sisters have you?"

"None. There's only me. I had a little baby brother; but mother says he died before I was born."

There was a long pause. Laura devoured the child with her eyes. "Where's your father?" she began again.

"He's dead."

"Oh!" retorted Laura scornfully. "Dead, is he! I suppose that's why your mother wears a widow's cap!"

The boy made no reply. Possibly he did not understand. Laura put her hand down over the gate and touched his light hair, pushing it back from his forehead. He held up the toy to show her.

"Yes, very pretty," said she carelessly. But suddenly it struck her that she had seen this toy, or one resembling it, in the toy-shop near their house. "Who gave you that?" she resumed.

"Mr. Carlton. He brought it to me just now."

Lady Laura's eyes flashed. The boy began making the soldier play the drum.

"He's to play to the others at drill," said he, looking up. "Mr. Carlton says so."

"What others?"

"My soldiers. They are shut up in the box now in mother's drawer."

"And so Mr. Carlton gave you this, did he?" repeated Laura in strangely resentful tones. "He has just brought it you, has he?"

"Wasn't it good of him!" returned the child, paying more attention to the plaything than to the question. "See how he drums! Mother says——"

"Lewis! Are you going to stop there all night? Come in directly and finish your supper!"

It was the voice of Mrs. Smith, calling from the cottage. Laura Carlton started as if she had been shot, and departed in the direction of South Wennock.

CHAPTER VII.

MR. AND LADY LAURA CARLTON AT HOME.

Lady Laura Carlton stood in her drawing-room, dressed for dinner. Hastening home from that expedition of hers to Tupper's cottage, of which you read in the last chapter, where she saw Mr. Carlton and spoke afterwards to the little child, she made some slight alteration in her attire and descended. In the few minutes her dressing occupied, her maid thought her petulant: but that was nothing new. As she entered the drawing-room she rang the bell violently.

"Where's Mr. Carlton?"

"Not in, my lady."

"Let dinner be served."

Lady Laura Carlton was boiling over with indignation. In this little child at Tupper's cottage, she had seen what she thought a likeness to her husband; a most extraordinary likeness; and she was suffering herself to draw inferences therefrom, more natural perhaps than agreeable. She recalled with unnecessary bitterness past suspicions of disloyalty on Mr. Carlton's part, which, whether well-founded or not, *she* had believed in. She remembered what might be called their renewed interchange of good-feeling only on the previous night. Lady Laura now believed that he was even then deceiving her, and a miserable feeling of humiliation took possession of her spirit, and she stamped her foot in passion.

She lost sight of probabilities in her jealous indignation. Resentment against the woman at Tupper's cottage seated itself in her heart, filling its every crevice. What though the woman was getting in years? though she was hard-featured, singularly unattractive, not a lady? In Lady Laura's jealous mood, had she been hideous as a kangaroo it would have made no difference.

Earlier in the day, when she had first passed the cottage with Lady Jane, the likeness she detected to her husband, or fancied she detected, excited only a half doubt in her mind, a sort of disagreeable perplexity. But the doubt rankled there; and as the day went on, Lady Laura, than whom a worse or more irritable subject for this sort of suspicion could not exist, felt impelled to wend her steps thither again. She could not have gone at a worse moment; for what she saw had had the effect of changing all her doubts into certainties.

She sat down to dinner, scarcely able to suppress her emotion, or keep in bare subjection the indignation that was rending her heart and her temper. It was no very unusual thing for her to sit down alone, for Mr. Carlton's professional engagements rendered him somewhat irregular. The servants in waiting saw that their lady was put out, but of course it was no business of theirs. Perhaps they thought it was occasioned by the absence of their master.

In point of fact, that gentleman was even then making his way home, speeding in haste from a second visit to Mrs. Knagg's, which he had hurried to pay on his return from Tupper's cottage, after leaving the toy with the child. Not that a second visit there was in the least required or expected of him, and Nurse Pepperfly opened her eyes in surprise when she saw him enter. "He had just called in in passing to see that all was going on well," he observed to the nurse; and particularly kind and attentive that functionary thought it of him. Lingering a moment, he beckoned her from the room, put a professional question or two as to the case in hand, and then

led the way easily and naturally to the case at Tupper's cottage, the knee of the boy.

"I suppose there is no want of means?" he casually remarked. "The little fellow ought to have the best of nourishment."

"And so he do," was the response of Mrs. Pepperfly. "I never see a mother so fond of a child, though she's a bit rough in her ways. If he could eat gold she'd give it him. As to money, sir, there ain't no want of that; she seems to have plenty of it."

"Have you not any idea who she can be?"

"Well, sir, in course ideas come to one promiscuous, without fetching 'em up ourselves," answered Mrs. Pepperfly. "*I* should think she's the person that took away the babby—though I can't say that my memory serves to recognize her."

"May be," carelessly remarked Mr Carlton. "Remember that you keep a quiet tongue about this, Mrs. Pepperfly," he concluded, as he went out.

"Trust me for that, sir," readily affirmed Mrs. Pepperfly.

And Mr. Carlton, conscious that his dinner-hour had struck, hastened home, and found his wife at table.

"Have you begun, Laura? Oh, that's all right. I have been detained."

Lady Laura made no reply, and Mr. Carlton sat down. She motioned to one of the servants to move the fish towards his master, who usually carved. For some minutes Mr. Carlton played with his dinner—played with it; did not eat it—and then he sent away his plate nearly untouched. This he appeared to do throughout the meal. Lady Laura observed it, but said nothing; she certainly was, as the servants expressed it amongst themselves, "put out," and when she did speak it was only in monosyllables or abrupt sentences.

"Are you going out this evening, Laura?" asked Mr. Carlton.

"No."

"I thought you were engaged to the Newberrys."

"I am not going."

He ceased; he saw, as well as the servants, that the lady was out of sorts. She never spoke another word until the cloth had been drawn, the dessert on the table, and the servants had gone. Mr. Carlton poured out two glasses of wine and handed one to Lady Laura. She did not thank him; she did not take the glass.

"Shall I give you some grapes, my love?"

"Your love!" she burst forth, with scornful, mocking emphasis. "How dare you insult me by calling me 'your love?' Go to your other loves, Mr. Carlton, and leave me. It is time you did so."

He looked up, astounded at the outbreak; innocent in himself, so far as he knew, of any offence that could have caused it.

"Laura! What is the matter?"

"You know," she replied; "your conscience tells you. How dare you so insult me, Mr. Carlton?"

"I have not insulted you. I am not conscious of any offence against you. What has put you out?"

"Oh, fool that I was," she passionately wailed, "to desert, for you, my father's home! What has been my recompense? Disinheritance by my father, desertion by my family, *that* I might have expected; but what has my recompense been from you?"

"Laura, I protest I do not know what can have caused this! If you have anything to say against me, say it out."

"You do know," she retorted. "Oh, it is shameful! shameful so to treat me!—to bring this contumely upon me! I, an earl's daughter!"

"You must be out of your mind," exclaimed Mr. Carlton, half doubting perhaps whether such was not the fact. "What 'contumely' have I brought upon you?"

"Don't insult me further! don't attempt to defend yourself!" retorted Laura, well-nigh mad indeed with passion. "Think rather of yourself, of your own conduct. Such transgressions on the part of a married man reflect bitter disgrace and humiliation upon the wife; they expose her to the contemptuous pity of the world. And they have so exposed me."

"Pshaw!" exclaimed Mr. Carlton, growing cross, for this was but a repetition of scenes enacted before. "I thought these heroics, these bickerings, were done with. Remember what you said last night. What has raked them up?"

"*You* ask *me* what has raked them up! Ask yourself, Mr. Carlton. You know too well."

"By Heaven, I do not! I have no more notion what you mean than *that!*" He raised a wine-glass as he spoke, and bringing it down again too fiercely, the fragments were scattered over the mahogany table.

The outburst half frightened Laura. Mr. Carlton's temper was impassive as his face, and she had never witnessed such from him before. Perhaps he was surprised at himself. But he had gone home full of inward trouble, and the attack, so uncalled for, was more than he could patiently bear.

"If you wish me to understand you, Laura, so as to be able to give you any answer, you must be more explanatory," he said, resuming his ordinary tones of calmness.

Lady Laura's lips quivered, and she leaned over the table, speaking in a whisper, low as the unsatisfactory topic deserved.

"In that cottage of Tupper's on the Rise, a woman and a child are living. *The child is yours!*"

An extraordinary change, possibly caused by surprise at the

accusation, possibly by indignation, passed over the aspect of Mr. Carlton. His face grew livid, his white lips parted. Laura noted all.

"It tells home, does it!" she exclaimed in a tone of bitter scorn. "I knew your conscience would accuse you. What have I done, I ask, that this shameless woman should be brought hither to insult me? Could you not have kept her where she came from? Must you bring her here, and parade her in my very presence?"

Mr. Carlton wiped the moisture from his face and recalled his senses, which seemed to have been scattered. He looked at his wife in very amazement.

"Suspect that woman of—— You are a fool, Laura, if you are not mad. I beg your pardon, but it must be one of the two. Until this day, when I was called in to attend the child, the woman was an utter stranger to me. Why, she looks old enough to be my mother! What are you thinking of?"

Lady Laura was thinking of a great many things, and they were not pleasant ones. Nevertheless her husband spoke so earnestly, so truthfully, that she was somewhat staggered in spite of her exasperation.

"It will come, next, that I must not visit a patient when called out to one," he proceeded severely. "You speak of shame, Laura, but I do not think it is I who ought to feel it. These absurd delusions bring yourself shame, but not me. I know nothing of the woman and her child. I solemnly declare to you that until last night I did not know Tupper's cottage was occupied, or that such people existed."

"Who summoned you to them?" inquired Laura, no relenting whatever in her words and aspect.

"Pepperfly, the nurse. I met the old woman at the gate here last night, as I was coming home from that dinner. She said a stranger with a sick child had come to Tupper's cottage, and would I go up at my leisure, and see it. If you will take the trouble to walk there, and inquire, you will find my statement correct: the boy has a white swelling in the knee."

"I have been," she replied with sullen composure.

Mr. Carlton gave a start of anger. "Very well, my lady; if you think it well to dodge my footsteps amongst my patients, you must do so. I don't know how I can prevent it. But if you hear nothing worse than that woman has to tell you, you won't hurt."

"Mr. Carlton! keep within the bounds of truth, if you please. When did I ever dodge your footsteps?"

"It seems like it, at any rate."

"No; my passing that cottage was an accident. I was out with Jane to-day, and she had to go down Blister Lane."

"What has given rise to this suspicion?" demanded Mr. Carlton,

feeling completely in the dark. "The very appearance of the woman might have shown you its absurdity. You must have gone to sleep and dreamt it."

Laura was in cruel perplexity of mind. *Were* her suspicions right, or were they wrong? She looked ready to break a glass on her own score, and she dropped her voice again and leaned towards Mr. Carlton.

"If it be as you say, why should there be so extraordinary a likeness between you and the child?"

"A likeness between me and the child!" he echoed in genuine surprise. "There's none in the world, none whatever. How can you so draw upon your flighty imagination?"

"There never was, I believe, so great a one in the world," was Laura's answer. "Every feature is similar, except the eyes. That is not all. Your ears are a peculiar shape, unlike any one's I ever saw; so are that child's. The very feather here," touching the parting of her own hair in front, "the wave of the flaxen hair: it is all you in miniature."

Now Mr. Carlton had failed to observe any likeness to himself; the thought had not crossed his mind. It was only natural, therefore, that he should disbelieve in the existence of any, and he believed his wife was asserting it, in her jealousy, without foundation.

"This is very absurd, Laura! I had hoped these fancies were done with."

"Why should he bear your name—Lewis?" proceeded Lady Laura.

"He does not bear it," replied Mr. Carlton, looking at her in further surprise.

"He *does!* Where is the use of your denying facts?" she angrily demanded.

"I asked the boy's name this afternoon, and his mother told me it was George. If he bears any other, all I can say, is, I do not know it. They did not mention another to me."

"I heard the woman speak to him as Lewis. The boy told me himself at the gate that his name was Lewis," reiterated Laura. "You gave him that toy!"

"I know I did. I have no children of my own; but I love children, and I often give a plaything to my little patients. Is there any harm in it?"

"Lewis is an uncommon name," she persistently resumed, fearing she was getting the worst of the argument. "And the likeness is there!"

"Upon my word, Laura, this is very absurd! If people call their children Lewis, I cannot help it. As to the likeness—pray did Lady Jane see this astounding likeness?" he broke off to ask.

"She did not say so."

"No, no. I believe you have drawn solely on your own imagination for this fancy, and that nothing of the sort exists. I can only assure you, and with truth, that I failed to observe it, as I hardly should have failed had it been there. The boy was a stranger to me until this day."

Laura replied not. She had nearly arrived at the conclusion that she had made a very ridiculous mistake. Mr. Carlton rose and went over to her.

"Understand me, Laura," he said in a serious and impressive tone, but one of friendly conciliation. "Whether the resemblance exists or not, it is equally unimportant to you and to me. I tell you that I was unconscious of the existence of these people until now. I tell you that, so far as I believe and know, the woman is a stranger to me. I have never known her in any way whatever; and I swear that I speak the truth, by the ties that exist between you and me!"

He held out his hand, and after a moment's struggle with herself —not caused so much by the point at issue, for she was now pretty well convinced that likeness and name must be accidental, as by the remembrance of certain former grievances which Mr. Carlton had not been able so triumphantly to clear up—she gave him hers. Mr. Carlton stooped and kissed her, and she turned her face to him and burst into tears.

"If I am suspicious, you have made me so, Lewis. You should never have tried me."

"The trials have been chiefly of your own making," he whispered, "but we will not revert to the past. But now—am I to go on attending this child, or am I not, Laura? It shall be as you please; it is nothing to me one way or the other. If you wish me not to do so, I'll hand the case over to Grey."

"Nonsense," responded Lady Laura.

CHAPTER VIII.

RUNNING FOR THE OINTMENT.

THE reply, "nonsense," of Lady Laura to Mr. Carlton's question was taken by that gentleman as an intimation that he was to go on with the case. And accordingly on the afternoon of the following day, he again went up to Tupper's cottage. Mrs. Smith had the boy on her lap at the table, the soldiers before him in battle array.

"I have forgotten half my errand," the surgeon exclaimed, as he threw himself in a chair, after speaking with her and the boy. "I intended to bring up a box of ointment and I have left it behind me."

"Is it of consequence, sir?"

"Yes, it is. I wanted to apply some to his knee myself. I'm dead tired, for I have been on foot all day, running about. Would it be too much to ask you to step down to my house for it? It is not far. I'll look at his leg in the meantime."

Mrs. Smith, paused, hesitated, and then said she would go. Mr. Carlton told her what to ask for: a small box done up in white paper, standing near the scales in the surgery. As she departed, he untied the linen round the child's knee, gave a cursory glance at it, and tied it up again.

"What's your name, my boy?"

"Lewis," said the child.

"I thought your mother told me yesterday it was George?"

"So it is George. It's Lewis George. Mother used to call me Lewis always, but she calls me George sometimes since we came here. Will you let me go to my soldiers?"

"Presently. Is your father dead?"

"He died before we came here; he died in Scotland. My black things are worn for him. Mr. Carlton, will that soldier drum always?"

"I think so," said Mr. Carlton. "George, my little man, you want some fresh air, and I shall put you outside in your chair until your mother returns."

Mr. Carlton did so. He not only put the boy in his chair, but he tied him in with a towel he espied; and, carrying boy, chair, and soldiers, he placed them against the cottage wall outside.

"Why do you tie me in, sir?"

"That you may not get down and run about."

"I won't do that. Since my leg was bad, I don't like running."

Mr. Carlton made no reply. He went in, beyond view of the boy, and there he began a series of extraordinary manœuvres. Upstairs and down, upstairs first, he went peeping about, now into this box, now into that; now into this drawer, now into that cupboard. One small box baffled him, for it was locked and double locked, and he thrust it back into its receptacle, for he had nothing to force it with, though he had tried his penknife. What was he hunting for?

Leaving every thing in its place, so that no trace of the search might be found, he went down to the kitchen again, threw open a drawer, and turned over its contents. An old envelope he clutched eagerly; it contained a prescription, and nothing else, but that he did not know. He was about to dive into its folds, when he became conscious that he was not alone. Mrs. Smith stood in the doorway, watching him with all her eyes. What on earth had brought her back so quickly, was Mr. Carlton's thought.

He dropped the envelope with a quick motion, recollected himself,

and continued to look in the drawer, his manner cool and collected. "I am searching for some rag," said he, turning to her.

"Rag!" repeated Mrs. Smith, who did not appear particularly pleased at his off-hand proceedings. "I don't keep rag in those drawers. You might have waited, sir, I think, till I came home."

"You were so long," replied Mr. Carlton. "I have not time to stop."

"Then, sir, I don't know what you'd call short," returned Mrs. Smith. "I ran all the way there and back."

Mr. Carlton took the ointment from her, repeated his request for some rag, brought the boy in, and proceeded to attend to his knee. He scanned the child's features from time to time, but could detect nothing of the resemblance spoken of by his wife. He completely made his peace with Mrs. Smith before he departed, told her laughingly always to have linen at hand ready for him, and then he should not want to dive into her hiding-places.

It was not, however, quite the truth that Mrs. Smith had run all the way back. In point of fact she had not come straight back, but had taken a short *détour* out of her way. She ran there, received the ointment without delay, and set off to run back again. But middle-aged ladies cannot run very far up a hill, be it ever so gentle a one, and Mrs. Smith slackened her pace. Just before she got to Blister Lane she overtook Judith, Lady Jane's maid, and joined her, walking with her past the lane, for Judith was in a hurry and could not stop to talk. Mrs. Smith reminded her of her promise to come and partake of tea; but Judith said she could not do so for a day or two; she was busy, getting her lady's autumn dresses in order.

"It's not autumn weather yet," remarked Mrs. Smith. "It's as hot as summer."

"But nobody knows how soon it may change, and my lady likes to have her things ready," was Judith's answer. "I'll be sure to come as soon as I can. I shall like to come. How's the little boy?"

"He's middling. I have had Mr. Carlton to him. He is at the cottage now. I have been to his house for this salve which he left behind him. I say, he's a curious man, isn't he?"

"Curious?" repeated Judith, not understanding how to take the remark.

"Curious in regard to one's business. He asked so many questions of me; wanting to know where we came from, and where we had lived, and where the boy was born; I don't know what he didn't ask. But I think he is clever. He seems thoroughly to understand the case. And he's very kind."

"He is considered very clever," said Judith. "His patients like him."

Lady Jane's gate was reached. It was only a little higher up than Blister Lane, on the opposite side of the way, and Mrs. Smith said good afternoon, and ran back again. Lady Jane had seen the woman at the gate, and spoke of her to Judith when the girl entered. To tell the truth, the likeness Jane had detected in the little child to her sister Clarice, had been haunting her mind since the previous day, more than she would have cared to tell.

"So you know that person, Judith?"

"I don't know much of her, my lady. I have spoken to her once or twice in passing the cottage. She was talking of her little boy. She has had Mr. Carlton to him."

"Is that her own child?" abruptly asked Lady Jane, after a pause. "She told me it was, but I almost doubt it. For one thing, she seems too old to have so young a child."

"Well, my lady, and so do I doubt it," cried Judith. "But I don't know anything certain."

"The boy bears so remarkable a likeness to—to—some one I know——"

"My lady, there never was such a likeness seen," eagerly interposed Judith. "It struck me the first moment I saw him."

"You!" rejoined Lady Jane; "struck you! Why, how did you know her? When did you see her? I spoke of my sister."

Judith stood, dumb.

"I'm sure I beg your pardon, my lady; I misunderstood you."

"I had another sister of whom you have not heard, Judith. That little boy's eyes are so exactly like hers that they seem to be ever before me. What likeness did you speak of?"

"Oh, my lady, it's not worth troubling you with. It was just a fancy of mine that the boy's face was like somebody's I know: not a lady's."

"Not a lady's?"

"A man's face; not a lady's."

"Ah, yes. Of course you could not have known my sister. She never was at South Wennock."

Judith lingered as if she had something she would like to say, and looked hard at Lady Jane; but she turned away without speaking. She wondered never to have heard that there was another sister: but the Chesneys, one and all, had kept the name from their households. In fact, considering the half-publicity that had been given to the affair when the services of the police were called in by Lord Oakburn in the search after his lost daughter, it had been kept wonderfully secret. But the likeness the child bore to Clarice continued to trouble the mind of Lady Jane.

And the likeness—that other likeness—festered in the heart of

Mr. Carlton's wife. In spite of her apparent satisfaction at the time of their explanation, the bitter suspicion sprang up again within her with a force that threatened mischief. There is no passion in this wide world so difficult to eradicate as jealousy.

CHAPTER IX.

AN ITEM OF NEWS.

LITTLE heirs are precious things, especially if they happen to be on the peerage roll of this aristocratic realm. Perhaps there was not an individual in the land more valued by those about him than was the young Lord Oakburn; and when, after his sojourn at Seaford, he seemed to languish rather than revive, his mother's fears were up in arms.

The young gentleman had caught cold soon after they returned to London, just as other boys will catch it. Complete master of Pompey, he had walked deliberately into a pond with his clothes on, in spite of that faithful retainer's efforts to prevent him, and the result was a slight attack of sore throat. It was magnified into a visitation of bronchitis, and Sir Stephen Grey was sent for. He soon recovered, but the disorder left him a little languid, and the countess said she must take him out again. She would take him to some of the spas of Germany, perhaps from thence to the South of France; possibly keep him abroad for the winter or part of it.

"It's not in the least necessary," said Sir Stephen.

Lady Oakburn thought it was, and decided to go. But while she was hesitating what place to choose, a letter arrived from her brother, the Reverend Mr. Lethwait, who held a continental chaplaincy, and in his letter he happened to speak of the lovely climate of the place, its healing virtues.

It was the turning point of the balance. If there had been a remnant of indecision in Lady Oakburn's mind, whether she should go or not, whether the expedition was really necessary, this ended it; and orders for her departure were issued to her household forthwith.

Lucy rebelled. Lucy Chesney actually rebelled. Not against the young earl's exile from England, but against her own. She was to be married the following spring: and, as every one knew, it would take from this time to that to prepare the trousseau and paraphernalia in general. Frederick Grey stepped in to the rescue; he knew nothing about the clothes and the paraphernalia; that was not in his department; but he did protest that Lady Oakburn must not be so cruel as to take Lucy away from England and from him.

The countess laughed, and said then Lucy must go for the time to Lady Jane's.

Compared with the other arrangement, this seemed pleasant and feasible. Jane was communicated with, and she—only too glad to have Lucy—hastened to London to take charge of her down. When she arrived in Portland Place, and the little lord ran up to her, she gazed at him with some anxiety.

"Have you come to take away Lucy, sister Jane?"

"Yes, darling. But, Frank, who says you are ill? I think you look famous."

Lady Oakburn interposed with a half apology for her previous anxiety. The young gentleman had picked up his crumbs (to use Sir Stephen's expression) in so astonishing a manner the last day or two, his face had grown so blooming and himself so noisy, that her ladyship felt half ashamed of herself. But she should rejoice in the opportunity of once more meeting her brother, she avowed to Jane, and the trip would do Frank good, even if he did not need it.

Jane purposed to stay in London one clear day. She reached it on the Thursday, and would return with Lucy on the Saturday. On that day Lady Oakburn would also take her departure.

On the Friday, Jane went out on foot. She had several little errands to do, purchases to make, and would not be troubled with the carriage. In fact, Jane Chesney had never cared to use a carriage so much as many do; she was a good walker and liked exercise.

It happened that her way led her through Gloucester Terrace. The reminiscences that locality called up were very bitter to Jane. How little she had thought, that long-past day when she first went in search of Clarice, that years and years would pass and bring no trace of her!

She walked along slowly. She was just at the spot where the house of the Lortons was situated; and she was looking up to see whether she could remember which it was, when a lady passed her on the pavement: a little fat lady with a very pleasing expression. That expression struck upon Jane's memory. Where had she seen it?

Fearing that she had passed, without speaking, some one whom she ought to know: an acquaintance possibly of her brief London life: Jane turned in the moment's impulse, and found that the lady had also turned and was looking at her. The latter stepped back with a smile.

"Lady Jane Chesney! I beg your pardon for passing you. My thoughts were elsewhere at the moment."

It was Mrs. West! But Mrs. West had grown so excessively stout that it was no wonder Jane had not recognized her. She was almost a second Mrs. Pepperfly. Jane's heart gave a glad leap,

and she held out her hand. This lady seemed to be the one only link between Clarice living and Clarice lost.

And now what a singular coincidence that Jane should have chanced to meet her there! *Chanced?* Something more than chance was at work in this commencement—for it was the commencement—of the unravelling of the fate of Clarice Chesney.

A few moments, and Lady Jane was seated in Mrs. West's house close by, listening to that lady's explanation. They had been abroad between six and seven years, she said; had educated their four daughters well—of whom she seemed not a little fond and proud, and regretted their absence from home that day, or she would have shown them to Lady Jane—and had now come back for good to England and Gloucester Terrace. Not to the same house: that was occupied: but to one within five or six doors of it.

Jane spoke of Clarice. And Mrs. West seemed thunderstruck, really thunderstruck, to hear that no tidings had been gained of her.

"It is like a romance," she cried. "But for your telling me yourself, Lady Jane, I should scarcely believe it. It seems so impossible in these days that any one should be lost. We read advertisements in the *Times* of gentlemen missing; now and then of a lady; but I think—at least I have always supposed—that the ladies at least come to light again. I and Mr. West have often talked of this affair. He saw you, Lady Jane, as perhaps you may remember, the day you called at our house when I was at Ramsgate. We thought—we concluded—but perhaps you would not like me to repeat it to you?" broke off Mrs. West.

"Indeed I should," replied Jane eagerly, not that she had any idea what it was Mrs. West hesitated to repeat. "The least word, the least surmise or conjecture, bearing upon my sister is of interest for me."

"Well, then, the conclusion we came to was, that Miss Beauchamp's marriage must have been an inferior one. That she had married in accordance with her temporary position, and did not like to avow it to her family, especially after they were ennobled. I am sure you will forgive my speaking thus freely, Lady Jane."

Jane did not altogether understand. The tone of the words surprised her.

"But still, we never supposed that she would not avow it in time," proceeded Mrs. West. "However inferior or unsuitable her marriage might have been, she would surely not keep it secret so long as this——"

"What marriage?" interrupted Jane. "Clarice was not married."

"Oh yes, she was."

"Do you know that she was?" gasped Jane. "*How* do you know it?"

Mrs. West paused in surprise. She was asking herself how it was that Lady Jane did not know it. It was so long ago that she forgot partially, but at length came to the unwelcome conclusion that she had neglected to make her acquainted with it. Not with the marriage itself; of that Mrs. West knew positively nothing: but of the grounds they had for assuming it to have taken place.

"Tell me about it now," implored Jane.

"We learnt it through an old servant," said Mrs. West. "A young woman named Mary Grove, who had lived with me as parlour-maid, and left just about the time that Miss Beauchamp left. Mary had fallen into bad health—indeed she was never strong, and I used to think the work too much for her—and she went home to be nursed. They were Suffolk people. She took another place in London when she grew better; and upon calling here one day to see us some considerable time afterwards, she told me that she had met Miss Beauchamp, and saw from her appearance that she was married."

"When did she meet her?—and where?" eagerly inquired Lady Jane.

"She had met her sometime in the course of the winter after Miss Beauchamp left us; at its turn, I think: I know the girl said it was a frosty day. And it was somewhere in this"—Mrs. West hesitated and spoke very slowly—"in this neighbourhood, I think, though I cannot remember precisely where. Mary accosted Miss Beauchamp, saying something to the effect that she was married, and Miss Beauchamp replied that she was so. She had married upon leaving Mrs. West's. The girl said she seemed in great spirits and looked remarkably well."

"When was it that you heard this?" asked Jane.

"I am not sure of the precise time, Lady Jane. It was after the interview I had with you."

"I wish you had told me of it."

"Indeed I am very sorry that I did not. I suppose I thought it not worth troubling you about. It was so very little news, you see; and there was nothing about it certain; no details. And in truth, Lady Jane, if I must confess it, I supposed that perhaps Miss Beauchamp did not care that you should know of her marriage just at first, but would take her own time for declaring it. One thing I may mention: that this information of the girl's had the effect of removing from my mind any fear on the subject of Miss Beauchamp —I ought to say of Lady Clarice."

"I wonder whether I could see that girl?"

Mrs. West shook her head. "She is dead, poor thing. She grew ill again, and died just before we went on the Continent."

Lady Jane was revolving matters in her mind. That Clarice

had married, there was now no room for doubt. The question remained, to whom?

"If she quitted your house to be married," she said aloud to Mrs. West, "we may safely argue that she must already have made the acquaintance of the gentleman. And how could she have done so, and where could she have met him?"

"I thought that over with myself at the time the girl told me this, and it struck me that she might have met him here," was the reply. "My husband's brother was then living with us, Tom West, and a very open-hearted, pleasant young fellow he was. He had just passed for a surgeon, and he used to fill the house with his companions; more so than I liked; but we knew he would soon be leaving, so I said nothing. Two of my cousins were on a visit to me that spring, merry girls, and they and Miss Beauchamp and Tom were much together."

"Could *he* have married her?" breathlessly interrupted Lady Jane.

"Oh no."

"Are you sure?" pursued Jane.

Mrs. West paused. It was the first time the idea had been presented to her.

"I do not think it likely," she said at length. "Tom West was of an open disposition, above concealment, and they must both have been very sly, if it did take place—excuse my plainness of thought, Lady Jane; I am speaking of things as they occur to me. No, no. If they had wished to marry, why have concealed it? Tom West was his own master, and I am sure we should have made no objection to Miss Beauchamp; we liked her very much. If she married any one of them, it was not Tom."

"Where is Mr. Tom West?"

"Oh, poor fellow, he went abroad directly; about—let me see?—about the following Feburary, I think. He was appointed assistant-surgeon to the staff in India, and there he died."

"What more probable than that she should have accompanied him?" exclaimed Lady Jane.

Mrs. West threw her reflections into the past.

"I do not think so," she said. "It seems to me next to impossible. *With him* I am quite certain she did not go, for we saw him off, and arranged his baggage, and all that. He was at our house until he sailed. No; if he had been married, especially to Miss Beauchamp, rely upon it, Lady Jane, he would not have kept it from us."

"Other gentlemen visited at your house, you say?" continued Jane.

"Plenty of them; Tom was rich in friends. Most of them were in the medical line, students or young practitioners. I dare say you may have observed how fond they are of congregating together.

All were not introduced to our society: Tom used to have them in his own room. Three or four were intimate with us, and had, as may be said, the run of the house, as Tom himself had."

"Who were they?" asked Jane. "It may have been one of them. What were their names?"

"Let me try to recollect," said Mrs. West. "We have mostly lost sight of them since that period. There was a Mr. Boys, who is now a doctor in good practice in Belgravia; and there was young Manning, a harum-scarum fellow who came to no good; and there was Mr. Carlton. I think that was all."

"Mr. Carlton!" repeated Jane, struck with the name. "What Mr. Carlton was that?"

"His father was a surgeon in practice at the East-end of London," replied Mrs. West. "He used to be very much here with Tom."

"Was his name Lewis?"

"Lewis? Well, I think it was. Did you know him, Lady Jane?"

"A gentleman of that name married my sister, Lady Laura. I know *him*."

"He was a good-looking, clever man, this Mr. Carlton—older than Tom, and by far the most gentlemanly of them all. We have quite lost sight of him. Stay. There was another used to come, a Mr. Crane; and I don't know what became of him. We did not like him."

"If it be the same Mr. Carlton, he is in practice at South Wennock," observed Jane, very much struck, she could scarcely tell why, with this portion of the intelligence. "Our family highly disapproved of Lady Laura's choice, and declined to countenance him."

"We fancied at the time that Mr. Carlton was paying attention to one of my two cousins; at least, she thought so. But his visits here ceased before Tom went out. I have an idea that he went to settle somewhere in the country."

"Did it ever occur to you to fancy that any one of these gentlemen paid attention to my sister?" inquired Jane.

"Never," said Mrs. West: "never at all. I remember that Tom and my cousins used to joke Miss Beauchamp about young Crane, but I believe they did so simply to tease her. She appeared to dislike him very much, and she could not bear being joked about him. None of us, except Tom, much liked Mr. Crane."

"And the remaining two gentlemen you have mentioned?—Mr. Manning and Mr.—— I forget the other name."

"Mr. Boys: Dr. Boys now. Oh no, it was neither of them, I am sure. They were not quite so intimate with us as the rest were. If she married any one of the young men, it must lie between Tom, Mr. Carlton, and Mr. Crane. But, to hear that she had done so, would astonish me more than anything ever astonished me yet. Tom, I

am fully persuaded, she did not marry; or Mr. Carlton either. If he had a preference any way, it was, I say, for my cousin, though the preference never came to anything. As to young Crane—if Miss Beauchamp's dislike to him was not genuine, she must have been a good actor. I cannot—looking back—I cannot think that she married any one of them," concluded Mrs. West.

This was all. It was only a small item of news. Lady Jane sat some time longer, but she had gained the extent of Mrs. West's information, and she went away revolving it.

She went down to South Wennock revolving it; she did nothing but revolve it after she was settled at home. And the conclusion she arrived at was, that Clarice *had* married one of those young men—and she thought the most likely one was Mr. Tom West.

And what of the Mr. Carlton? Could it be the one who was now Laura's husband? Lady Jane felt little, if any, doubt about it. The description, personal and circumstantial, tallied with him in all points; and the name, Lewis Carlton, was not a common one. Ever and anon there would come over Jane, with a shiver, a remembrance of that portentous dream, in which it had seemed to be shown her that her sister Clarice was dead, and that Mr. Carlton had had some hand in causing the death. *Had* one of these young men married Clarice, and worked her ill? and was Mr. Carlton privy to it? But Jane, a just woman, shrank from asking that question, even of her own mind. She had no grounds whatever for suspecting Mr. Carlton of such a thing; and surely it was wrong to dwell upon a *dream* for them. There was one question, however, that she could ask him in all reason—and that was, whether he was the Mr. Carlton mentioned by Mrs. West; if so, it was possible that he could impart some information of her sister. Jane did not think it very likely that he could, but it was certainly possible.

And in the meantime, while Jane was seeking for an opportunity for doing this, or perhaps deliberating upon the best way of asking it, and how much she should say about Clarice, and how much she should not, a fever broke out at South Wennock.

CHAPTER X

TAKING THE AIR.

A GLOOMY time had come on at South Wennock. Usually a remarkably healthy place—indeed, had it not been so, the few medical men established there could not have sufficed for it—it was something new to be visited by an epidemic, and people took alarm. The fever was a severe one, and a few patients had died;

but still it was not so bad as it might have been; as it is occasionally in other places. The town was hurriedly adopting all sorts of sanitary precautions, and the doctors were worked off their legs.

Lady Jane Chesney regretted on Lucy's account that it should have happened at the present moment. Not that she was uneasy about her; Jane was one of those happy few who can put their full and entire trust in God's good care, and so be calm in the midst of danger: "Whoso dwelleth under the defence of the Most High, shall *abide* under the shadow of the Almighty." But she was sorry this sickness should prevail now, because it made the visit for Lucy a sad one.

Jane lived in the same quiet style as ever. Since the addition to her income through the money left her by old Lady Oakburn, she had added only one man-servant to her modest household. The two maids, of whom Judith was one, and this man, comprised it. Not that Jane economized. She dressed well, and her housekeeping was liberal; and she gave away a great deal in a quiet way. But the young, full of life, loving gaiety, might have called her house a dull one. She feared Lucy was finding it so; and it certainly did not need the sickness and alarm to add to it.

Jane was saying this as she sat one night alone with Lucy. They had promised to spend the evening with some friends, but just as they were about to leave home, a note was brought in from the lady to whom they were engaged. One of her servants was taken ill, and she feared it might be the fever: perhaps therefore Lady Jane would prefer to put off her visit.

"I should not have minded for myself," remarked Jane, as they sat down to a quiet evening at home, "but I will not risk it for you, Lucy. I am so sorry, my dear, that South Wennock should be in this uncertain state just now. You will have reason to remember your dull visit to me."

Lucy laughed. She did not look very dull as she sat there in her evening dress of gay silk, some sort of enamelled ornaments, a necklace and bracelets glistening with steel mountings, on her fair neck and arms. She had taken up some embroidery, was already busy with its intricacies, and she looked up with a laughing eye at Jane.

"Indeed I am not sorry to be kept at home, Jane. Dull as you call my visit, all my work seems to get on very slowly; and you know I promised myself to do so much. But, Jane—if I may say one thing," Lucy added, her gay tones changing to seriousness, "*you* seem dull and dispirited. You have seemed so ever since we came from London."

Jane paused a moment. "Not dispirited, Lucy, dear. I have been preoccupied: I acknowledge that."

"What about?" asked Lucy.

"I would rather not tell you, Lucy. It is only a little matter on my mind: a little doubt: something I am trying to find out. I cannot help thinking about it constantly, and I suppose it has made me silent."

You need not ask the source of Jane's preoccupation. That it was connected with her sister Clarice you will have already divined. Since the information received from Mrs. West, that Clarice had married, Lady Jane had been unable to divest herself of an impression that that little child at Tupper's cottage was Clarice's child. The only possible ground for her fancy was the extraordinary likeness (at least, as Jane saw it) in that child's eyes and general expression to Clarice. The features were not like hers; quite unlike, indeed; but the eyes and their expression were Clarice's over again. Added to this—and perhaps the fact somewhat strengthened Jane's doubts—was the *manner* of his ostensible mother, Mrs. Smith. From the very first, Jane had thought she looked old to be the mother of so young a child; but she had hard features, and such women, as Jane knew, often look much older than they really are. Several times since her return from London Jane had passed the cottage and talked to the little boy over the gate. Once she had gone in—having been civilly invited by Mrs. Smith to rest herself—and she had indirectly tried to ascertain some particulars of the child's past life: where he was born, and where he had lived. But Mrs. Smith suddenly grew uncommunicative and would not answer. The boy was her own, she said; she had had another son, older than this, but he had died; she had married very late in life. Her husband had occupied a good post in a manufactory at Paisley in Scotland, and there her little boy had been reared. Upon her husband's death that summer, she had left the place and come back to her native country, England. So far, Mrs. Smith was communicative enough; but beyond these points she would not go; and upon Lady Jane's rather pressing one or two questions, the widow became quite rude. Her business was her own, she said, and she did not recognize the right of strangers to pry into it. Lady Jane was baffled. Of course it might all be as the woman said; but there was a certain secrecy in her manner that made Jane suspicious. She had, however, no plea for pressing the matter further; and she preferred to wait and, as it were, feel her way. But she thought of it incessantly, and it had rendered her usually equable manner occupied and absent; so much so as to have been observed by Lucy.

"Is it anything about Laura?" asked Lucy in answer to Jane's last observation.

"Oh no. Nothing at all."

"Do you think, Jane, that Laura is happy? She seems at times so strangely restless, so petulant."

"Lucy, I hope she is happy: I cannot tell. I have observed what you say, but I know nothing."

"Mr. Carlton seems very indulgent to her," returned Lucy.

And in point of fact, Lucy had been quite struck with this indulgence. Jane's own decision, not to visit at Mr. Carlton's house, whether springing from repugnance, or pride, or what not, she had strictly adhered to; but she had not extended the prohibition to Lucy; and Lucy was often at Laura's, and thus had an opportunity of seeing Mr. Carlton's behaviour to his wife. She told Jane that she liked Mr. Carlton better than she had liked him as a little girl. She remembered, she said with a laugh, that she then entertained a great prejudice against him; but she liked him now very well, and he was certainly fond of Laura. Jane agreed that Mr. Carlton's manners were gentlemanlike and agreeable; she had now and then met him in society, and nothing could be more courteous than was Mr. Carlton's manner to herself; but, into his house Jane still declined to enter.

"I think he has always been most indulgent to her," observed Jane. "Laura, I fear, is of difficult temper; but—— Are we going to have visitors to-night?"

The question was caused by a visitor's knock. Impromptu evening visitors to Lady Jane Chesney were rare. The servant opened the drawing-room door.

"Mr. Frederick Grey, my lady."

Lucy threw down her embroidery. Jane smiled; the dull evening had changed for Lucy.

He came in with a radiant face. They questioned him upon his appearance in South Wennock, when they had believed him in London, reading hard for his degree. Frederick protested that his Uncle John had invited him down.

"I suppose the truth is, you proffered him a visit," said Jane. "Or perhaps came without any notice at all."

Frederick Grey laughed. The latter was in truth the fact. But Frederick never stood on ceremony at his Uncle John's: he was as much at home there as at his father's.

And as the days went on and sickness in South Wennock increased, Mr. John Grey declared that his nephew's visit was the most fortunate circumstance that could have happened. For the medical men were scarcely equal to the additional calls upon them, and Frederick took his full share of duty. So, after all, the visit, which he had intended to be nothing but a short and delightful holiday with Lucy Chesney, was changed into one of work, and—in one sense—disappointment. For he could only venture to see her occasionally, every other day or so; neither had he time for more; and then with the precaution of changing his clothes.

Lady Laura Carlton's feet seemed instinctively to take her to Blister Lane, past the front of Tupper's cottage. Jealousy has carried women to less agreeable places. The unhappy suspicion—how miserably unhappy it was to be in its ultimate effects, neither Laura nor any one else could dream of—connecting her husband with that little child, had grown to a height that was scarcely repressible; and Laura was in the dangerous frame of mind that has been metaphorically likened to touchwood—wanting only a spark to kindle it into a flame.

Not a day passed but she walked down Blister Lane. She would take her way up the Rise, turn down the lane, pass the cottage, which was situated at this end of it, walk on a little way, and then come back again. All as if she were merely walking to take the air. If she saw the little boy in the garden, she would stop and speak to him; her jaundiced eyes devouring the likeness which she thought she detected to Mr. Carlton. It seemed that she could never tire of the comparison.

It was not altogether jealousy itself that took Lady Laura there, but a determination that had sprung from it. A resolve had seated itself firmly in her mind to sift the matter to its foundation; to bring to light the past. She cared not what means she used: the truth she would know, come what would. Of a sufficiently honourable nature on the whole, Lady Laura forgot honour now. Mr. Carlton had reproached her with "dodging" his steps; she was prepared to do that, and worse, on her way to discovery.

It might have been described as a disease, this mania that was distracting her. *What* did she promise herself would be gained by thus haunting Blister Lane? She did not know. All she could have told was, that she was unable to rest away from the place. For one thing, she wanted to ascertain how frequently Mr. Carlton went to the cottage.

But fortune had not favoured her. Not once had she chanced to light upon the time that Mr. Carlton paid his professional visit. Had she met him—of which there was of course a risk—an excuse was ready. As if fate wished to facilitate her project, Lady Laura had become acquainted with the fact that a young woman, expert in fine needlework, lived in Blister Lane; she immediately supplied her with some, and could have been *going there to see about it* had she been inconveniently met.

One gloomy day in November, Laura bent her steps in the usual direction. It did not rain, but the skies were lowering, and anyone might have supposed that Lady Laura was better at home than out of doors. She, however, did not think so. In her mind's fever, outward discomfort was as nothing.

As she passed the gate of Tupper's cottage, Mrs. Smith, in her

widow's cap, was leaning over it, gazing in the direction of South Wennock, as if expecting some one. She looked at Laura as she came up; but she did not know her for the wife of Mr. Carlton. And Lady Laura, with averted eyes and a crimson flush on her haughty cheeks, went right into the road through the mud, rather than pass near the gate. It was the only time she had seen Mrs. Smith since that first day, for the widow kept much within the house.

On went Laura in her fury; and she never turned until she came to the cottage of the seamstress. It seemed that she required an excuse to her own mind for being in the lane that day. The conclusion she had arrived at in her insensate folly was, that the woman was looking out impatiently for the advent of Mr. Carlton. What passion that this earth contains can ever befool us like that of jealousy!

She went in, gave some directions about the work, so confused and contradictory as nearly to drive the young woman wild, and then retraced her angry steps. Excessively astonished was she, to see, just on this side Tupper's cottage, a sort of hand-carriage standing in the middle of the path, and the little boy seated in it. He looked weak and wan and pale, but his beautiful eyes smiled a recognition of Lady Laura.

"Why are you here?" she asked.

"She took off her pattens and forgot them, and she has a hole in her boot," lucidly replied the child.

"Who's 'she?'" resumed Laura.

"The girl that Mr. Carlton sent. He says I must go out as long as I can, and she comes to draw me. The drum's broke," continued the boy, his countenance changing to intense trouble: "Mr. Carlton broke it. He kissed me because I didn't cry, and he says he'll bring me another."

"Is Mr. Carlton there now?" hastily asked Laura, indicating the cottage.

"Yes. It was the drum broke, not the soldier. He hit it too hard."

A clanking of pattens was heard in the garden path, and a stout country girl came forth. She knew Lady Laura by sight, and curtsied to her. Laura recognized her as a respectable peasant's daughter who was glad to go out by day, but who could not take a permanent situation on account of a bedridden mother.

"The little boy looks ill," remarked Lady Laura, rather taken to, and saying any words that came uppermost.

"Yes, my lady; and they say he is weaker to-day than he has been at all."

"Mr. Carlton says so?"

"His mother says so. Mr. Carlton hasn't seen him yet. He has not been to-day."

Laura strode away, vouchsafing no further notice of the speaker, or so much as a word of adieu to the little child. In her heart of hearts she believed the girl was telling her a lie; was purposely deceiving her; and that Mr. Carlton was even then within the cottage. The child's words, "the girl that Mr. Carlton sent," were beating their refrain on her brain. Why should Mr. Carlton send a girl to take out any child, unless he held some peculiar interest in him? she was asking herself. Ah, if she could only have seen the thing as it actually had been!—how innocent it was! When the boy grew past running about, Mr. Carlton said he must still go into the open air. The mother hired this little carriage, and was regretting to Mr. Carlton that she could not hear of a person to draw it. He thought at once of this young woman, whose mother he was attending at the time; and said he would send her. That was the whole history. Laura Carlton, in her blind jealousy, knew not the bed that she was preparing for herself.

She went straight home, walking rapidly, and entered the house by the surgery, as she would do now and then in her impatient moods, when she could not bear to wait while the front door was opened. Mr. Carlton's assistant, Mr. Jefferson, was standing there, and raised his hat to her.

"When do you expect Mr. Carlton in?" she asked, as she swept past.

"Mr. Carlton is not out, Lady Laura."

"Mr. Carlton is out," she rejoined, turning her angry face upon the surgeon.

He looked surprised. "Indeed no, Lady Laura. Mr. Carlton came in about half-an-hour ago. He is down in the drug-room."

Lady Laura did not believe a word of it. Were they *all* in league to deceive her? She turned to the lower stairs, determined to see with her own eyes and confute the falsehood. This drug-room was a small boarded apartment, to which access could be had only through the cellar. Mr. Carlton kept drugs and other articles there pertaining to his profession. The servants had strict orders never to enter it, lest, as Mr. Carlton once told them, they might set their feet on combustible materials and get blown up. They took care to keep clear of it after that warning.

Lady Laura passed through the cellar and peered in. Standing before an iron safe, its doors thrown wide open, was Mr. Carlton. Laura saw what looked like bundles of papers and letters within it; but so astonished was she to see her husband, that a sudden exclamation escaped her.

You have heard of this room and this safe before. Mr. Carlton once locked up in it a letter which he had received from his father, that long-past evening when he first heard of the illness of Mrs.

Crane. Laura knew of the safe's existence, but had not felt any curiosity with regard to it. She had penetrated to this room once in her early married days, when Mr. Carlton was showing her over the house, but never since.

A sudden exclamation escaped her. It appeared to startle Mr. Carlton. He shut the safe door in evident haste, and turned round.

"Laura! Is it you? Whatever do you want down here?"

Laura was unable to say at the moment what she wanted, and in her perplexity spoke something very near the truth. Mr. Jefferson had said he was there, but she thought he was out, and came to see.

She turned away while she spoke, and Mr. Carlton looked after her in surprise, as she made her way quickly up the stairs.

So in this instance, at least, there had been no treachery, and Lady Laura, so far, might have sat down with a mind at rest. The little child had evidently misunderstood her question, when she asked whether Mr. Carlton was within the cottage.

CHAPTER XI.

LADY JANE CHECKMATED.

On the morning subsequent to these events, Lady Jane and Lucy were sitting together after breakfast. Lucy had complained of headache, and was leaning her head upon her hand, when Judith came in with a note. It proved to be from Lady Laura. She had twisted her ankle, she said; was consequently a prisoner, and wished Lucy to go and help her to pass a dull day.

"I should like to go, Jane," said Lucy. "A walk in the air may take away my headache."

"You are sure you have no sore throat?" asked Jane, somewhat anxiously. She had put the question once before.

Lucy smiled. Of course people were suspicious of headaches at this time. "I don't think I have any sore throat, Jane. I ate my breakfast very well. I did not sleep well last night, and that has made my head feel heavy."

On her arrival at Mr. Carlton's, Lucy found Laura on a sofa in her dressing-room; a pretty apartment on the first-floor.

"Are you quite an invalid?" asked Lucy.

"Not quite; I can manage to limp across the room. But the ankle is swollen and rather painful. Did Jane object to your coming?"

"Not at all. How did you contrive to hurt it, Laura?"

"I was in mischief," returned Lady Laura, with a half laugh. "And you know, when people do get to mischief on the sly, punish-

ment is sure to follow. Don't our first lessons in the spelling-book tell us so?"

"What was the mischief?" returned Lucy.

"I and Mr. Carlton are not upon the best of terms; there is a grievance between us," was Laura's answer. "You need not look so serious, Lucy; I do not mean to imply that we are enemies, but we are not precisely as turtle-doves. He has secrets which he keeps from me; I know he has; and get at them I will. There's deceit abroad just now, and I vow and declare that I'll come to the bottom of it."

Lucy listened in wonder. Laura would say no more. "No," she observed, "it is nothing particularly suited to your ears: let it pass, so far. He has a strong iron safe in the cellar, and in this safe he keeps papers and letters and things. I know, because I went down yesterday, when he had the door open, and he started like a coward, when he saw me, and shut it up. Well, I thought I should like to see what there is in that safe, and I stole down to the cellar last night with my bunch of keys, to try whether any one of them would unlock it."

"Oh, Laura!" broke forth Lucy, shocked and pained beyond expression. "How could you think of such a thing?—how could you do it?"

"Wait until you have a husband like Mr. Carlton, who puts you out of temper with his underhand ways, and then see what you would 'think' and 'do,'" retorted Lady Laura.

And Lucy ventured no further remonstrance, for she had once been a child under Laura's control, and was somewhat in awe of her still.

"I went in the dark, lest the servants should see me," proceeded Lady Laura, "taking some wax matches with me, to light when I got down. All went well. I tried the keys (none of which fitted, so I was baffled there), and blew out my lights to come back again. We have to go down three steps in coming out of the drug-room, where the safe is, and mount two to get into the cellar—wretched incapables the builders must have been, to make you go down steps only to come up again! Well, Lucy, I slipped on something at the top of these three steps, and down I went to the bottom. I could hardly get up at first, for the pain in my foot, and a regular fright I was in, fearing I must call the servants. However, I did succeed in crawling back. There's the history of the whole matter."

And a very creditable one too! Lucy sat in wonder.

"I have told it you out of bravado," continued Laura, who seemed to be in a reckless mood; "and you may repeat it to Jane, if you like. When he came home he wanted to know how I had done it. 'Slipped,' I answered; and he got no more out of me."

A silence ensued, which Lucy broke, passing to another theme.

"We heard a rumour, Laura, that Mr. Carlton was likely to give up his practice here. Frederick Grey mentioned it."

"He says he shall. *I* don't know. Of course London's the best field for a medical man. Talking of Frederick Grey, what's the reason that Mr. Carlton dislikes him so much?"

"I know nothing about it," replied Lucy.

"I heard him going on to Mr. Jefferson about Frederick Grey's being down here interfering with the practice. There never was any love between them. Young Grey used to be very outspoken, saying Mr. Carlton drove his father from the town."

"As he did," returned Lucy quietly. "At least it was so reported in the old days, I remember. But that is all past and done with, and Frederick was but a boy then. He is not interfering with Mr. Carlton's practice."

"No; Mr. Carlton would see him far enough away, rather than allow that. Lucy! are you ill? Your eyes look heavy, and your cheeks are flushed."

Lucy had been bending her head upon her hand for the last few moments, as she had done earlier in the morning at her sister Jane's. "I got up with a headache," she replied, lifting her eyes wearily. "I thought the air, as I came along, might have done me good, but it has not, and my throat is getting sore."

"Throat getting sore!" echoed Laura. An instant's pause, and she started from the sofa in consternation, forgetting her lameness, seized her sister, and drew her to the light of the window.

"Lucy! it cannot be! you are never going to have the fever!"

"Oh no, of course I am not," was the answer.

But Lucy *was* going to have the fever. In fact, Lucy had the fever upon her then. And Lady Jane did not know of it until night, when she was expecting Lucy home; for Laura, from carelessness or from some other motive, never sent to tell her. At nine o'clock the footman was despatched with the news, but it was Mr. Carlton who sent him.

Lady Jane could not believe it. It was simple Jonathan, and she thought the man must have made some mistake. Lady Lucy was in bed, he said. She had been taken ill soon after reaching their house. Mr. Carlton was out at the time, but on his return he pronounced it to be fever. He had charged Jonathan to give his respects to Lady Jane, and to assure her that every care and attention should be paid to the invalid.

Now nothing in the world could have been much less welcome than this news to Lady Jane Chesney. To her mind there was something of duplicity in their thus taking possession of Lucy, and she remarked so privately to Judith. Apart from Lady Jane's anxiety for Lucy, she had an unconquerable aversion to her lying

ill at Mr. Carlton's, to her being attended by that gentleman, or to herself becoming an inmate, however temporarily, in his house, which she must do, were Lucy to remain there. She took a moment's counsel with herself, for Lady Jane was one who rarely did things upon impulse, then attired herself for walking, and proceeded to Mr. Carlton's, taking Judith with her, and ordering her own footman to go as quickly as he could to Mr. Grey's and bring back that gentleman to Mr. Carlton's.

The best room, a large and handsome spare chamber adjoining Lady Laura's dressing-room, had been hastily prepared for Lucy. She was lying in it, looking flushed and anxious, and complaining of her head and throat.

"Jane," she whispered, as her sister bent over her, "Mr. Carlton says it is the fever. I wish I could have been at home with you!"

"You should have returned the instant you found yourself getting worse, Lucy," was Jane's answer. "I thought you were possessed of common sense, child. Laura, *you* ought to have sent her home. Where was your carriage, that she could not have the use of it?"

"It was not her fault—or mine," replied Laura. "Mr. Carlton administered some remedies this morning soon after we found she was ill, and he wished to watch their effect; to-night he says she is too ill to be moved. But, if you will allow me to express my private opinion, Jane, I should say that all has happened for the best; for where can she be so well attended to as in the house of a medical man? And you may be sure she will have good nursing."

"Laura, I would rather have her with me; she is under my charge, you know. I wonder if she can be moved now?"

"You must be stupid to think it," returned Laura.

"I told Mr. Carlton I felt well enough to be taken home," spoke Lucy, "but he said I did not understand the risk. I think I might be taken, Jane."

Jane inquired for Mr. Carlton. He was in the dining-room, taking some refreshment after a hard day's work, and she went to him. He rose in astonishment. Lady Jane Chesney in *his* house.

"Mr. Carlton," she said, speaking quietly in spite of her anger, and she did feel very angry: "I have come to convey Lady Lucy home. I fancy it may be done without risk."

"Impossible, Lady Jane. It might cost her her life."

"I cannot but think, sir, before you had assumed to yourself the responsibility of keeping her, that you might have sent to inquire my pleasure upon the subject," returned Lady Jane with dignity. "The fever must be quite in its earliest stage, and there was no reason why she could not have been sent home. She was well enough to walk here this morning, and she was, I make no doubt, not sufficiently ill to debar her returning this evening."

"It has come on very rapidly indeed," replied Mr. Carlton; "and I think she will have it badly."

"I still wish to take her home, if possible," persisted Jane, somewhat agitated by the last words; "and I have despatched a messenger for Mr. Grey, that he may come here and give me his opinion upon the point. In doing this, I wish to cast no slight upon your judgment and skill, Mr. Carlton, but Mr. Grey is my own attendant, and I have unusual confidence in him; moreover, he will not be prejudiced, for her removal or against it. You and I, sir, perhaps are so; though from opposite sides."

"I do not understand you," spoke the surgeon.

"I am prejudiced in favour of taking her; you, in favour of keeping her; Mr. Grey, on the contrary, will give his honest opinion, for he can have no motive to be biased either way."

"Yes, he can," rejoined Mr. Carlton. "A good patient will fall into his hands, if he takes her away."

True, so far; but the words vexed Jane. "She will be his patient in either case, Mr. Carlton. I mean, I say, no reflection on your skill; but my own doctor must attend on Lady Lucy, wherever she may be."

The cold, haughty tone of the words and manner, the "*Lady* Lucy," stung Mr. Carlton. Jane's treatment of him, her utter rejection of any intimacy, had been boiling up within him for years. He so far forgot his usual equanimity, he so far forgot himself as to demand, with a flash of passion and a word that had been better left unsaid, whether he was not as efficient as John Grey. Jane put him down with calm self-possession.

"Sir, it is true that my sister is your wife; but I beg you not to forget that I am Lady Jane Chesney, and that a certain amount of respect is due to me, even in your house. I do believe you to be as efficient as Mr. Grey; that your skill is equal to his; but that is not the question. *He* is my medical attendant, and I would prefer that he took the case into his own hands."

"It's well known, sir, that when people are ill, no place seems to them like home," interposed Judith, who had quite adopted her lady's prejudices in the affair, and followed her to Mr. Carlton's presence. "We'd a great deal better have her at home."

Before any rejoinder could be made, a sound was heard in the hall, and Mr. Carlton turned to it, Jane following him. Frederick Grey had entered: and Mr. Frederick was in a state of agitation scarcely to be suppressed. He caught hold of Lady Jane.

"My uncle was out, and I came in his stead," he cried, his words rendered half unintelligible by emotion. "Where is she? Is she very ill?"

An altercation ensued. Mr. Carlton, whose temper was up (a

most unusual thing with him), stepped before his visitor to impede his way to the stairs.

"Mr. Frederick Grey, I cannot permit you to be in my house. Had your uncle come, I would have received him with all courtesy; but I wish to know by what right you intrude here."

"I don't intrude willingly," was the answer. "I have come to see Lady Lucy Chesney."

"You cannot see her. You shall not pass up my stairs."

"Not see her!" echoed Frederick, staring at Mr. Carlton as though he thought he must be out of his mind. "Not see her! You don't know what you are saying, Mr. Carlton. She is my promised wife."

He would have borne on to the stairs; Mr. Carlton strove to prevent him, and by some means the gas became extinguished; possibly the screw was touched. The servants were in the hall; hearing the altercation, they had stolen into it; Lady Laura, with her damaged foot, was limping downstairs. The women-servants shrieked at finding themselves in sudden darkness; they were perhaps predisposed to agitation by the dispute; and Lady Laura shrieked in concert, not having the faintest notion what there could possibly be to shriek at.

Altogether it was a scene of confusion, in the midst of which Frederick Grey, pushing every one aside with scant courtesy, made his way to the staircase. Mr. Carlton would have prevented him, but was impeded by the servants, and at the same moment some words were whispered in a strange voice in his ear.

"Would you keep her here to poison her, as you poisoned another?"

Simultaneously with this, there was some movement at the hall door: a slight sound as if some one had either come in or gone out. It had been ajar the whole time, not having been closed after Frederick Grey's entrance, for Lady Jane's footman stood outside, waiting for orders.

Mr. Carlton—all energy, all opposition gone out of him—stood against the wall, wiping his face, which had turned cold and moist. But that he had heard Frederick Grey's footsteps echoing up the stairs beforehand, he would have concluded that the words came from him. Some one struck a match, and Mr. Carlton became conscious, in the dim flash of light, that a stranger was present,—a shabby-looking man who stood just within the hall. What impulse impelled the surgeon, he best knew, but he darted forward, seized, and shook him.

"Who are you, you villain?"

But Mr. Carlton's voice was changed, and he would not have recognized it for his own. The interloper contrived to release himself, remonstrating dolefully.

"I'm blest if this is not an odd sort of reception when a man comes for his doctor! What offence have I been guilty of, sir, to be shook like this?"

It was inoffensive little Wilkes, the barber from the neighbouring shop. Mr. Carlton gazed at him in very astonishment in the full blaze of the re-lighted gas.

"I'm sure I beg your pardon, Wilkes! I thought it was—— Who came in or went out?" demanded Mr. Carlton, looking about him in all directions.

The servants had seen no one. It was dark.

"I came to fetch you, sir," explained the barber, who sometimes had the honour of operating on Mr. Carlton's chin. "My second boy's a bit ill, and we think it may be the fever. I wasn't for coming for you till morning, sir, but the wife made a fuss and said there were nothing like taking things in time; so when I shut up my shop, I came. I suppose you took me for a wild bear, marching in without leave."

"Did you meet any one, or see any one go out?" asked Mr. Carlton, passing over the wild-bear suggestion.

"I didn't, sir. I was going round to the surgery, when I saw the hall light disappear, and heard women screaming. Naterally I come straight in at the big door, wondering whether anybody was being murdered."

At the foot of the stairs, standing side by side, contemplating all these proceedings with astonishment, and not understanding them, were the ladies, Jane and Laura. They now asked an explanation of Mr. Carlton.

"I—I—thought I heard a stranger; I thought some one had come in. I feel sure some one did come in," he continued, peering about him still in a curious sort of way.

"Will you step down, please, sir, to the boy?"

"Yes, yes, Wilkes, I'll be with him before bedtime," replied Mr. Carlton. And the forgiving little barber turned away meekly, and met Mr. John Grey coming in.

Frederick Grey had made his way upstairs. An open door, and a light within, guided him to Lucy's chamber. Ill as she was, she uttered an exclamation of remonstrance when she saw him, and covered her face with her hot hands.

"Oh, Lucy, my darling! To think that it should have attacked you!"

"Frederick! what do you do here? Where is Jane? It is not right."

He drew away her hands to regard her face, he passed his own cool hand across her brow; he took out his watch to count the beatings of the pulse.

"I am here professionally, Lucy; don't you understand? Could I entrust my future wife to any one else?" he asked in a voice that literally trembled with tenderness. "I have been at the bedside of patients to-day, love, young and delicate as you."

"I do feel very ill," she murmured.

The fear that was upon him increased as he gazed at her, arresting the life-blood at his heart. What if he should lose her?—if this scourge should take her away from him and from life? And of course there was only too much reason to fear that it might have been communicated to her through his visits. A scalding tear dropped on to her face, and Lucy, looking up, saw that his eyes were wet.

"Am I then so very ill?" she murmured.

"No, no, Lucy; it is not that. But this has come of my imprudence. I ought to have kept away from you: and I cannot bear that you should suffer pain! Oh, my darling——"

They were coming in, Mr. Grey and Lady Jane. The experienced surgeon moved his nephew from the bed, as if the latter were only a tyro. And indeed he was so, in comparison with the man of longer practice.

Mr. Grey could not recommend Lucy's removal; quite the contrary. He saw no reason why she should not have been taken home at first, he said; but it had better not be attempted now. Jane was deeply annoyed, but she could only acquiesce.

"It cannot be helped," she said, with a sigh. "But I am grievously vexed that she should be ill, away from my house. Remember she is in your charge, Mr. Grey."

"In mine? What will Mr. Carlton say to that?"

"It is of no consequence to me what he says," was the reply. "I cast no slight upon Mr. Carlton's skill: I have told him so; and if he chooses to attend her, conjointly with you, I have no objection whatever to his doing so. But Lucy's life is precious to me, and I have confidence in you, Mr. Grey, from old associations."

Frederick Grey found that he was to be excluded from the sick-room. His attendance as a medical man was not necessary. And both Mr. Grey and Lady Jane thought his visits might tend to excite Lucy. In vain he remonstrated: it was of no use.

"She is to be my wife," he urged.

"But she is not your wife yet," said Mr. Grey, "and you may trust her safely to me. Be assured that if dangerous symptoms arise, you shall be the first to hear of them."

"And to see her," added Lady Jane.

With this he was obliged to be content. But he was terribly vexed about it. He stooped to kiss her hot lips in the impulse of the moment's tenderness.

"Don't—don't," she murmured. "You may take the fever."

"Not I, child. We medical men are feverproof. Oh, Lucy, my best and dearest, may God bring you through this!"

Mr. Carlton was pleased to accept the alternative, and agreed, with some appearance of suavity, to attend Lucy in conjunction with Mr. Grey. Putting aside the implied reflection on his skill —and this, Jane reiterated to him, was not intended—he had no objection to the visits of Mr. Grey. The fact was, Mr. Carlton would have liked to bring Lucy triumphantly through the illness himself, as he felt confident he could do; she would have had his best care, looking for no reward, as his wife's sister; and he felt mortified that the case should have been partly taken out of his hands. It was a slight, let Lady Jane say what she would; he felt it, and no doubt the town would freely enough make its comments.

"And now, Laura," said Jane, seeking her sister, "as you and Mr. Carlton have saddled yourselves with Lucy, you must also be troubled with me and Judith, who is invaluable in a sick-room. I shall not move out of this house until I can take Lucy with me."

Lady Laura clapped her hands in triumph. "Well done, Jane! You, who would not condescend to put your foot over our door-step, to be brought to your senses at last! Checkmated! It serves you right, Jane, for your abominable pride."

"It has not been pride," returned Jane. "Pride has not kept me away."

"What then? Prejudice?"

"No matter now, Laura; we have an anxious time before us. Mr. Grey thinks that Lucy will be very ill."

"Just what Mr. Carlton said; and he kept her here to take care of her. I am sure he will be glad to extend a welcome to you, Jane, as long as you choose to stay with us. He has always been willing to be friendly with you, but you would not respond. He takes prejudices; I acknowledge that; but he never took one against you. He has taken one against Judith."

"Against Judith! What has she done to Mr. Carlton?" asked Jane in surprise.

"Nothing. But he does not like her face. He says it always strikes him as being disagreeable. *I* like Judith, and I'm sure she's a faithful servant."

Mr. Carlton, inquire as he would, was unable to discover how that whisper could have reached him. That some one had entered the hall and gone out again, he entertained not a doubt of. He made inquiries of Lady Jane's footman, whether he had seen any one enter; but the man acknowledged that he had been out of the way. After the entrance of Mr. Frederick Grey, he had waited a

minute or two, and then had gone round to the servants' entrance by the surgery.

So Mr. Carlton was as wise as before. And meanwhile no one could imagine why he should think that any stranger had been in the hall, in addition to little Wilkes the barber.

CHAPTER XII.

DANGER.

Lady Lucy Chesney lay in imminent danger. Only a few days ill, and her life was despaired of. The anticipations of the surgeons —that she would have the fever badly—had been all too fully borne out. They had done what they could for her, and it was as nothing.

None could say that Mr. Carlton was not a kind and anxious attendant. Lady Jane thanked him from her heart. She half began to like him. That he was most solicitous for Lucy's recovery was indisputable; and it may be said that she was in his hands, not in Mr. Grey's, his opportunities of seeing her being of necessity so much more frequent. Jane sat by the bedside, full of grief, but not despairing as those who have no hope. She possessed sure confidence in God; full and perfect trust; she had learnt to commit all her care to Him; and to those who can, and do, so commit it, utter despair never comes. Jane believed that every earthly means which skill could devise was being tried for the recovery of Lucy; and if those means should fail, it must be God's will; she tried to think, because she *knew*, that it would still be for the best, although they in their human grief might repine and see it not.

Lady Laura had also taken the fever. But she had it so very slightly that she need not have remained in bed at all; and before the worst had come for Lucy, she was, comparatively speaking, well again. Laura was exacting; it was in her nature to be so; and Lady Jane had often to leave Lucy's room for hers, when there was not the least necessity for it. Mr. Carlton was anxious and attentive, but he knew from the first there would be no danger, and he told Laura so. The result was that she called him "unfeeling." An unmerited reproach. If ever man was anxious for the well-doing of his wife, that man was Mr. Carlton.

Frederick Grey went in once with his uncle to Lucy's chamber, after the danger had set in. She did not know him; and he had only the pain of seeing her turn her head from side to side in delirium. If Lady Jane did not despair, he did; the sight almost unmanned him.

"Oh, merciful Heaven, save her!" he inwardly murmured. "Save her, if only in compassion to me!"

It was not alone the dreadful grief for Lucy; it was the self-reproach that was haunting him. He assumed that the disorder must have been communicated to Lucy through him, and remorse took hold of him. What could he do?—what could he do? He would have given his own life willingly then, to save that of Lucy Chesney.

He went straight from the sick chamber to the telegraph office at Great Wennock. South Wennock had been in a state of resentment some time at having to go so far if it wanted to telegraph, and most certainly Frederick Grey now endorsed the popular feeling. Then he went back to South Wennock to Mr. Carlton's. Jonathan advanced from his post in the hall to the open door: open that day that there might be neither knock nor ring.

"Do you know how she is now?" he asked, too anxiously excited to speak with any sort of ceremony.

"There's no change, sir. Worse, if anything."

He suppressed a groan as he leaned against the pillar. Chary of intruding into Mr. Carlton's house, after that gentleman's reception of him the first night of Lucy's illness, he would not enter now. He tore a leaf from his pocket-book, wrote some words on it in pencil, folded, and gave it to Jonathan.

"Let Lady Jane have this when an opportunity arises. But don't disturb the sick-room to give it her."

The paper, however, soon found its way to Jane. She opened it in some curiosity.

"I have telegraphed for my father. He may not be able to do more than is being done, but it will at least be a satisfaction to me. He knows Lucy's constitution, and there's something in that. If I lose her, I lose all I care for in life."

Words quiet and composed enough; scant indication did they give of the urgent, impassioned nature of the message gone up to Sir Stephen.

Jane approved of what he had done. Though she had little faith in further advice being availing, it would, as he said, be a satisfaction. She wished Lady Oakburn was as much within their reach as Sir Stephen Grey. If the worst happened to Lucy, the blow to her almost more than mother would be bitter.

Dangerous illness connected with our history was in another habitation of South Wennock that day. The little boy at Tupper's cottage, of whom mention has been so frequently made, and who had created doubt and speculation in more minds than one, had become rapidly worse in the past week; and Mr. Carlton saw that he could not save him. Greatly worked as Mr. Carlton just then

was out of doors,—having Lucy on his hands at home, not to speak of his exacting wife—he had not on this day been able to go to the cottage. Mr. Jefferson went up and brought back the report. The boy was no better, and the mother was excessively anxious.

"She did not like my calling," observed the assistant-surgeon to Mr. Carlton. "She said she hoped you would be able to get up to-day, if only for a minute."

Mr. Carlton gave no particular answer. He would go if he could, but did not think time would permit him; and he knew his going could do the child no good.

Mrs. Smith, to her own surprise, found she was to be favoured with a levee that afternoon. The little fellow, for whom a temporary bed by day had been made up in the parlour, was lying upon it asleep, and Mrs. Smith sat by him. The leg gave him a great deal of pain now, but it seemed easier than it had been in the morning; and in these easy intervals he was sure to sleep. The young woman, whom you saw drawing the child's carriage not long ago, had taken up her abode in the house, by Mrs. Smith's desire, to do the work, go on errands, anything that might be required; and there is always enough to do in illness. She was out now: having had leave to go and see her mother; and Mrs. Smith had fallen into a doze herself, when she was aroused by a sharp knock at the cottage door.

She went into the kitchen and opened it. There stood a little shrivelled woman in a black bonnet, with a thin, battered-looking sort of face. Mrs. Smith had seen her before, though she retained not the slightest recollection of her; and the reader has seen her also.

It was Widow Gould from Palace Street. She had been honoured by a call from Mrs. Pepperfly that morning, which led, as a matter of course, to a dish of gossip; and the result was, that the widow became acquainted for the first time with Mrs. Smith's presence at South Wennock, and Mrs. Pepperfly's various speculations arising therefrom. Consequently the widow—and there were few more curious widows living—thought she could not do better than go up to the cottage and claim acquaintance.

Mrs. Smith received her with some graciousness. The truth was, Mrs. Smith was growing rather out of conceit of the plan of secrecy she had adopted since her sojourn at South Wennock. Her only motive for it (if we except a natural reserve, which was habitual) had been that she thought she might find out more particulars of Mrs. Crane's death as a stranger, *if* there was anything attending that death which needed concealment. Until she heard of the death, she had not the remotest idea of secrecy. But the plan had not appeared to answer, for Mrs. Smith could learn no more than she

had learnt at the commencement of her sojourn, and she talked readily enough to the widow.

Upon hospitable thoughts intent, Mrs. Smith set out her tea-table, laying the tray in the kitchen, not to disturb the little sleeper in the parlour. True, it was barely three o'clock, rather an early hour for the meal; but it has become fashionable, you know, to take an early cup of tea. Before they had sat down to it, another visitor arrived. It was Judith Ford.

It appeared that Judith had been obliged to come to Cedar Lodge that afternoon upon some matter of business: and Lady Jane had told her to call in and ask after the little boy at the cottage. Jane had heard of his increasing illness; and she thought much of him even in the midst of her anxiety for Lucy.

"It's like magic, your meeting here together!" exclaimed Mrs. Smith.

For there was always a feeling resting in the woman's mind that all the circumstances connected with Mrs. Crane's death had not been detailed to her; a constant hope that a chance word might reveal to her something or other hitherto unknown. Judith said she could stop for a quarter-of-an-hour, and Mrs. Smith handed her some tea in triumph, for the promised tea-drinking, when Judith was to spend an evening at the cottage, had not yet taken place. What with Lady Jane's visit to London, and Lucy's sojourn with them here, and one thing or another, Judith had not been able to find time for it.

It would have been strange had the conversation not turned upon that long-past tragedy. The Widow Gould, who loved talking better than anything else in the world, related *her* version of it, and the other widow listened with all her ears. Mrs. Gould, it must be remembered, in conjunction with the nurse, had never admitted that there could be truth in that vision of Mr. Carlton's, touching the man on the stairs; it a little exasperated both of them to hear it spoken of, and she began declaiming against it now. An unnecessary precaution, since Mrs. Smith had never before heard of it. It appeared, however, to make a great impression upon her, now that she did hear it.

"Good Heavens! And do you mean to say that that man was not followed up?"

"There was no man to follow," testily returned the Widow Gould, upon whom the past seven or eight years had not sat lightly, and she looked at least sixty-six. "I've never liked Mr. Carlton since, I know that. It might have took away our characters, you know, ma'am."

Mrs. Smith did not appear to know anything of the sort, or even to hear the delicate insinuation. She had risen from her seat to fill

the teapot from the kettle on the fire; but she put it down again in haste.

"It was just the clue I wanted!" she exclaimed. "Just the clue. I thought it so strange that he had not been here; so strange, so strange! It was more unaccountable to me than all the rest."

"What do you mean?" exclaimed the little shrivelled woman, staring at the evident excitement.

"I mean her husband. The man concealed on the stairs must have been her husband."

"What, Mr. Crane?"

"Of course it was. *He* killed her. I feel as certain of it as if I had seen it done. How came that fat nurse, Pepperfly, not to tell me this?"

"Mother Pepperfly don't believe in it," said Mrs. Gould. "She's as certain as I am, that no man was there."

"You might have told me this," resumed Mrs. Smith, turning to Judith. "Why, it throws more light upon the subject than all the rest put together."

"I have not had much opportunity of telling you anything," answered Judith, who had sat in her usual silent fashion, sipping her tea and listening to the other two. "But I don't believe it, either, for the matter of that."

"Believe what?"

"That any man was concealed on the stairs."

"But—I can't understand," cried Mrs. Smith. "Did Mr. Carlton not see one there?"

"He fancied he did at the moment. But he came to the conclusion afterwards that the moonlight had deceived him."

"And it was never followed up?"

"Oh dear, yes," said Judith. "The police sought for the man for a long while, and could never find him."

"And they came to think at last, ma'am—as everybody else of sense had thought at the time—that there wasn't any man there," put in the little widow.

"Then I can tell them to the contrary," was Mrs. Smith's emphatic rejoinder. "That man was poor Mrs. Crane's husband. I happen to know as much."

Little Mrs. Gould was startled at the words. Judith put down the bread and butter she was about to convey to her mouth, and gazed in astonishment.

"Yes," continued Mrs. Smith, "it must have been him. I know —I feel that it was him. He was at South Wennock: I know so much as that."

"You *know* this?" continued the other two breathlessly.

"I do. I know that Mrs. Crane's husband was at South Wennock."

"And where is he now, ma'am?" asked the widow.

"Ah, where indeed!" was the answer, given angrily. "I have never since heard of him in all these years. I came down here now to find out what I could about him—and about her."

"It's what old Pepperfly told me this morning, ma'am; she said she was sure you hadn't come for anything else. I know what I should have done in your place," added the widow. "I should have declared myself to the police the minute I came, and got them to rake up the affair again. You see there was nobody here belonging to the poor lady at the time, and it made the police careless over it—leastways, many folks have held that opinion. All I can say is, that if there was any Mr. Crane on the stairs that night, he must have stole in down the drawing-room chimbly, for he never come in straightforwardly at the door."

"There's time enough yet to declare my business to the police," was Mrs. Smith's answer. "I have preferred to remain quiet, and feel my way. Not but that one or two have suspected who I was. Judith, here, for one; she remembered me at once."

"And Mother Pepperfly for another," remarked the widow, handing up her cup for some more tea.

"No, she did not; at first she did not recollect me at all," said Mrs. Smith, as she filled it. "I think Mr. Carlton suspects who I am."

Judith lifted her eyes. "Why do you think so?"

"Because he asked so many questions when I first came here—who I was, and what I was, and all the rest of it; I believe he'd have gone on asking till now if I had not put him down. And one day I caught him looking curiously into my drawers; he *said* he was searching for rag for my child's knee, but I have always thought he was looking to see what he could find."

"Why! Mr. Carlton met you that time at the station at Great Wennock!" exclaimed Mrs. Gould, the event recurring to her memory. "I remember it came out at the inquest."

"Was it Mr. Carlton I met there?" resumed Mrs. Smith, after a pause, during which she had cast her thoughts back to the long-past incident. "I did not recognize him again. It was almost dark at the time, I remember. But perhaps his eyes were keener than mine. At any rate, I feel sure he knows who I am. Why else should he put all those questions to me?"

"It's only natural to him to ask them," observed the Widow Gould. "He'd like it to be brought to light as well as the rest of us."

"Of course he would," was Mrs. Smith's acquiescent answer. "Once or twice I have been upon the point of talking to him about it, but I thought I'd wait; I thought I'd wait."

She spoke this in a dreamy sort of way. Judith rose and put back her chair. She could not stay long on that day of anxiety, and she did not care to ask Mrs. Smith questions in the presence of the other.

"I say," broke in that other, "how long did that little mite of an infant live? Pepperfly says it's dead."

"Not very long," replied Mrs. Smith. "It wasn't to be expected that it would. I wish you could stay, Judith."

"I wish I could," was Judith's answer. "It's impossible to-day. There's nothing can be *done* for Lady Lucy, poor thing, but one must be in the house."

"Report says, Judy, that Lady Laura—— My goodness! who's coming now?"

The Widow Gould's abrupt remark was caused by the dashing up to the gate of some sort of vehicle. They crowded to the window to ascertain what it could be.

It was only a baker's cart. And seated in state beside the driver was Mrs. Pepperfly.

It appeared that her duties at Mrs. Knagg's were over, through that lady's being, as Mrs. Pepperfly expressed it, on her legs again, and she had left her the previous day. Consequently she was at leisure to make calls upon her circle of friends. It struck her that she could not do better than devote the afternoon and evening to her new acquaintance in Blister Lane, where she should be sure of enjoying a good tea, and might happen to drop upon something nice for supper—pickled pork, or some other dainty; not to reckon the chance of being invited to take a bed. The friendly baker had accommodated her with a lift in his cart. How he had contrived to get her up, he hardly knew; still less how he should get her down again. While this was being accomplished, the Widow Gould running out to assist in the process, the little boy awoke and cried aloud. Altogether, what with one distraction and another, Judith found it a good opportunity for slipping away.

She was half-way down the Rise, when she met Mr. Carlton driving up in his open carriage. He was on his way to pay a visit at Tupper's cottage.

CHAPTER XIII.

SIR STEPHEN'S VISIT.

DOWN thundered Sir Stephen Grey as fast as the express train could take him. The message had disturbed him in no measured degree. Lucy Chesney given over! At Great Wennock he found his son waiting with a fleet horse and gig. A minute's explanation, and they were skimming along the smooth road.

"Any change since you telegraphed, Frederick?"

"None for the better, sir."

There was an interval of silence.

"My son, what a pace you are driving at? Take care what you are about."

"The horse is a sure one, father. And *she* is lying between life and death."

Sir Stephen said no more. As the gig reached South Wennock, and dashed through it on its way to Mr. Carlton's, the inhabitants flocked to their doors and windows. What could possess young Frederick Grey, that he was driving in that mad fashion? But, as their eyes fell on his companion, they recognized him, and comprehended. Sir Stephen Grey, the great physician, brought down from London in that haste? Then Lady Lucy Chesney must indeed be dying.

Mr. Carlton happened to be at home when the gig drew up. He had just returned from that visit to Tupper's cottage. At the first moment he did not recognize his visitor. But he did so when he met him in the hall.

"Sir Stephen Grey?" he exclaimed, his manner cold, his tones bearing marked surprise. In that first moment he scarcely understood how or why Sir Stephen had arrived.

"How d'ye do, how d'ye do, Carlton?" unceremoniously spoke Sir Stephen in his haste, as he brushed past him. "Which room is she lying in?"

Whether opposition was or was not in the surgeon's mind, he did not offer it. Indeed there was no time for it, for Sir Stephen had gone quickly up the stairs. For one thing, Mr. Carlton was preoccupied, sundry little trifles at Tupper's cottage having considerably put him out. He understood the case now: Frederick Grey—or perhaps Mr. John Grey—had telegraphed to Sir Stephen on Lucy's account. Mr. Carlton had no objection to Sir Stephen's seeing her: but he asked himself in what way Sir Stephen's skill was better than theirs, that he need have been summoned; and he resented its having been done without consulting him.

He looked out at the front door, and saw Frederick Grey driving away in the gig, quietly now. Mr. Carlton sent after him a scornful word: he disliked him as much as he had done in the days gone by.

Sir Stephen was already at his post in Lucy's chamber, Lady Jane alone its other inmate. Mr. Carlton went in once, but Sir Stephen put his finger on his lip to enjoin silence. A few words passed between them in the lowest whisper, having reference to the case; its past symptoms and treatment; and the surgeon stole away again.

For three long hours Stephen Grey remained in the chamber, never quitting it; three long hours, and every moment of those hours might be that of death. Lady Jane caused a sandwich to be brought to the door and a glass of wine, and he took the refreshment standing. And the time wore on.

When Sir Stephen left the house it was night. A little beyond Mr. Carlton's, nearer the town, was a space unoccupied by houses; it was dark there, for no friendly gas-lamp threw out its light. Pacing this dark spot, was one with folded arms; he had so paced it since night set in. The baronet recognized his son.

"The crisis has come," said Sir Stephen. "Come: and passed."

Frederick Grey struggled with his agitation. He strove to be a man. But he essayed twice to speak before any words would issue from his bloodless lips.

"And she is dead?"

"No. She will recover."

He placed his arm within his son's as he spoke, and walked on, perceiving little of the emotion. Sir Stephen was of equable mind himself; he liked to take things easily, and could not understand that Frederick must be different. Frederick, however, was different: he had inherited his mother's sensitive temperament. Sir Stephen caught a glimpse of his face as they passed the window of Wilkes the barber, who had a flaring gas-jet therein to display the beauties of a stuffed gentleman, which turned upon a pivot.

"What's the matter, Frederick? Don't you feel well?"

"Oh yes. A little—anxious. Are you sure the crisis is favourable?"

"Certain. If she dies now, it will be from weakness. I wonder Lady Jane allowed her to be ill at Carlton's."

Even yet Frederick was not sufficiently himself to enter into any explanation. It was not Lady Jane's fault, was all he said.

"You won't go back to-night, father?"

"No. I shall stay until morning, but I am sure she is all right now. Youth and beauty can't escape, you see. To think that it should have attacked Lucy Chesney! Fortunately she has a good constitution."

They walked on to Mr. John Grey's, where Sir Stephen would remain for the night. Most cordially was he welcomed; Mrs. Grey said it seemed like old times to see him back again.

There were many cases, even at that present time, where the fever had taken as great a hold as it had upon Lucy, and when the fact of Sir Stephen's arrival became known—and the news spread like wildfire—Mr. Grey's house was besieged with applicants, praying that Sir Stephen would afford the sick the benefit of his advice, before he went back to London. So much for popular opinion! A few years ago, Mr. Stephen Grey had been hunted from the town; scarcely a soul in it would have taken his advice gratis; but Sir Stephen Grey, the London physician, who attended upon royalty, had risen to a wonderful premium. Had all the faculty of the College of Physicians combined been at South Wennock, none would have been thought much of, in comparison with Sir Stephen Grey.

Did he refuse to go? Not he. At the beck and call of any in South Wennock—for he was not one to pay back evil in its own coin, Sir Stephen went abroad. In at one house, out of another, until the little hours of the morning, went he. And not a fee would he take, either from rich or poor. No, no, it was for old friendship's sake, he said, as he shook them by the hand; for old friendship's sake.

Twice in the evening he visited Lucy, and found that the favourable symptoms continued; nay, were growing more and more apparent. Jane would scarcely release his hand; she could not divest herself of the idea that he had saved Lucy. No, Sir Stephen said: Lucy's constitution would have triumphed without him, under God.

Mr. Carlton, who had recovered his equanimity, invited Sir Stephen into his drawing-room, and seemed disposed to be cordial; but Sir Stephen told him, and with truth, that he had no time that night even for a minute's conversation; South Wennock would give him no rest.

When Sir Stephen reached his brother's house it was one o'clock, and, to his surprise, he saw another applicant waiting for him; a stout female of extraordinary size, who was dozing in a chair, under the hall lamp. His coming in aroused her, and she stood up, curtseying after her peculiar fashion.

"You don't remember me, sir."

"Why, bless my heart!—if I don't think it's Mother Pepperfly!" he exclaimed, after a minute's doubtful stare. "What have you been doing with yourself? You have grown into two Mrs. Pepperflys."

"Growed into six, Mr. Stephen, if I'm to be reckoned by breadth. Hope you are well, sir, and your good lady!"

"All well. And now, what do you want with me? To recommend you to a mill that grinds people slender again?"

Mrs. Pepperfly shook her head dolefully, intimating that no such mill could have any effect upon her, and proceeded to explain her business. Which she persisted in doing at full length, in spite of the hour and Sir Stephen's fatigue.

It appeared—rather to Mrs. Pepperfly's own discomfiture—that Mrs. Smith was *not* able to invite her to a bed, owing to the only spare one being occupied by the maid-servant; but she was treated to a refreshing tea and liberal supper, and enjoyed her evening very much; the Widow Gould's presence adding to the general sociability. The widow left early; she kept good hours; but Mrs. Pepperfly was in no hurry to depart. She really did make herself useful in attending to the child, and sat by him for some time after he was carried up to his room. She offered to remain with him for the night, but this Mrs. Smith entirely declined. It had not yet come to sitting up nights with him.

In the course of the evening, the news which had been spreading through South Wennock reached Tupper's cottage: Mr. Carlton's boy, who had carried up some medicine, imparting it. The great London doctor, Sir Stephen Grey, had been telegraphed for, and come down to Lady Lucy, and was now paying visits to the sick throughout the town, going to cure them all. Mrs. Smith devoured the news, as a parched traveller alights upon water. She loved the child passionately, hard and cold as were her outward manners; and it seemed that this whispered a faint hope for his life. Not that she had reason to be dissatisfied with Mr. Carlton; she acknowledged that gentleman's skill, and was sure he did his best; but the very name of a great physician brings magic with it. She asked Mrs. Pepperfly to find out where Sir Stephen was staying, as she went home, and to call and beg him to step up in the morning; and to be sure and say he would receive his fee, whatever amount it might be, lest he might think it was only a poor cottage, and decline the visit. Upon this last clause in the message the nurse laid great stress, when delivering it to Sir Stephen.

But not one word did she say, or hint impart, that this Mrs. Smith was the same person who had played a part in the drama which had driven Stephen Grey from his former home. Mrs. Pepperfly was a shrewd woman; she did not want common sense: and she judged that that past reminiscence could not be pleasant to Sir Stephen. At any rate she would not be the one to recall it to him. She simply spoke of Mrs. Smith as a "party" who had settled lately at South Wennock, and she reiterated the prayer for Sir Stephen to go up.

"But I have no time to do so," cried Sir Stephen. "What's the matter with the boy? The fever?"

"Bless you, no, sir," replied Mrs. Pepperfly. "He haven't enough of fever in him, poor little object! He's going off as fast as he can go in a decline and a white swelling in his knee."

"Then I can do no good."

"Don't say that, Mr. Stephen, sir. If you only knowed the good a doctor does, just looking at 'em, you wouldn't say it. But in course you do know it, sir, just as well as me. He mayn't save their lives by an hour, and mostly don't in them hopeless cases; but think of the comfort it brings to the mind! If you could step up for a minute in the morning, sir, she'd be everlastingly grateful."

Telling her he must leave it to the morning to decide, though he gave a half promise to find time if possible, Sir Stephen dismissed Mrs. Pepperfly. He had a good laugh afterwards with his brother John at her size. "What about the old failing?" he asked.

"Well, it's not quite cured," was the reply, "but it is certainly no worse. She keeps within bounds."

With the morning, Sir Stephen was up and out early. Many were still sending for him. Indeed every one in the town would fain have had a visit from him, could they have invented the least shadow of an excuse, illness or no illness. His first care was Lucy Chesney, who was decidedly better: temperature normal, intellects collected: in short, Lucy was out of danger.

"And now for this cottage of Tupper's, if I must go up," he exclaimed to his son, who had walked with him to Mr. Carlton's but had not entered. "I declare it is unreasonable of people! What good can I do to a dying boy?"

One thing must be mentioned. Frederick Grey had not the remotest idea that there was any suspicion, anything singular, attaching to this woman and child. That suspicion was confined as yet to very few in South Wennock. He had incidentally heard that such people were living in Tupper's cottage, but he supposed them to be entire strangers.

The boy was in bed upstairs, and Mrs. Smith was putting her house in order, for she had sent the girl for some milk. She had not expected the doctor so early. He passed quickly up the stairs, leaving her to follow, for he had not a minute to lose. The little fellow, in his restlessness, had one arm out of his nightgown sleeve, leaving it exposed. Sir Stephen's attention was caught by a mark on the arm, underneath the shoulder. He looked at it attentively; it was a very peculiar mark, almost black, and as large as a bean. He was talking to the child when Mrs. Smith came up.

"Is there any hope, sir?" she whispered, after Sir Stephen had examined the child and was preparing to do down.

"Not the least. He won't be here long."

Mrs. Smith paused. "At any rate, you tell it me plain enough, sir," she said presently, somewhat resentfully. "There's nothing in that very soothing to a mother's feelings."

"Why should I not tell you?" rejoined Sir Stephen. "You said you wished for my candid opinion, and I gave it. You are not his mother."

"Not his mother!" she echoed.

"That you are not. That child's one of mine."

"Whatever do you mean?" she exclaimed in astonishment.

"I mean that I brought that child into the world. "Look here," he added, retracing his steps to the bed, and pulling aside the night-gown to exhibit the mark. "I know the child by that, and could swear to him among a thousand."

She made no reply. They descended to the kitchen, where Frederick was waiting. Sir Stephen talked as he went down.

"The mother of that child was the unfortunate lady who died at the Widow Gould's in Palace Street some years ago: Mrs. Crane. I have reason to remember it, if no one else has."

The widow fixed her eyes on Sir Stephen. "I asked Mrs. Pepperfly—who was the attendant nurse upon that lady—whether the infant was born with any mark upon it, and she told me it had none."

"I don't care what Mrs. Pepperfly told you," returned Sir Stephen. "She may have forgotten the mark; or may possibly not have seen it at the time, for her perceptive faculties are sometimes obscured by gin. I tell you that it is the same child."

Frederick Grey was listening with all his ears, in doubt whether he might believe them. He scarcely understood. Mrs. Smith gave in the point: at least so far as that she did not further dispute it.

"You are the gentleman, sir, who attended that lady. Mr.—Mr.——"

"Mr. Stephen Grey, then: Sir Stephen, now. I am; and I am he against whom was brought the accusation of having carelessly mixed poison with her draught."

"And you did not do it?" she whispered.

"I! My good woman, what you may be to that dead lady, I know not; but you may put perfect faith in this that I tell you. Over her poor dead body, and in the presence of her Maker and mine, I took an oath that the draught went out of my hands a good and wholesome mixture, that no poison was put into it: and I again swear it to you now, within shadow of her dying child."

"Who did do it?" continued the woman, breathing hardly.

"Nay, I know not," replied Sir Stephen, as he sat down to write a prescription with his pencil, ink not being at hand. "Smith! Smith!" he repeated to himself, the name, in connection with the

past, striking upon his memory. "Why, you must be the Mrs. Smith who came to take away the child!"

Possibly Mrs. Smith saw no further use in denying it; possibly she no longer cared to do so. "And what if I am, sir?"

"What if you are!" echoed Sir Stephen, starting from the chair, and regarding her in astonishment. "Why, my good woman, do you know that pretty nearly the whole world was searched to find you? No one connected with the affair was wanted so much as you were."

"What for?"

"To give what testimony you could; to throw some light upon the mystery; to declare who and what the young lady was," reiterated Sir Stephen, speaking very fast.

"But if I couldn't?" rejoined Mrs. Smith.

"But I don't suppose you couldn't. I expect you could."

"Then, sir, you expect wrong. I declare to Goodness that I know no more who the lady was—that is, what her family was, or what her connections were—than that child upstairs knows. I have come down to South Wennock now to find out; and I never knew that Mrs. Crane was dead until after I arrived here."

Sir Stephen Grey was surprised. Frederick, who was leaning his elbow on the back of a chair, carelessly played with his watch-chain.

"Where's her husband?" asked Sir Stephen, sitting down again.

"Sir, it's just what I should like to know. I have never heard of him since I took the baby from South Wennock."

"But you must in a measure know who she was! You could not have come here, as you did, to take the child from an utter stranger."

Mrs. Smith was silent. "I knew her because she lodged at my house," she said at length. "I don't know why I should not say it."

"And her husband? Was he lodging with you also?"

"No. Only herself. Sir, I declare upon my sacred word that I don't know who she really was, or who her husband, Mr. Crane, was. It's partly because I didn't want to be bothered with people asking me things I was unable to answer, that I have kept myself quiet here, saying nothing about its being the same child."

"And you did not know she was dead?"

"I did not know she was dead. I have been living with the child in Scotland, where my husband was in a manufactory; and times upon times have we wondered what had become of Mrs. Crane, that she did not come or send for her child. We thought she must have gone to America with her husband. There was some talk of it."

"And you know nothing about the death?—or the circumstances attending it?" reiterated Sir Stephen.

"I know nothing whatever about it," was the reply, spoken

emphatically. "Except what has been told me since I came here this time. Mrs. Crane lodged with me in London, and left me suddenly to come to South Wennock. I received a note a day or two afterwards, saying her baby was on the point of being born, and asking me to come and fetch it. It had been arranged that I should have the nursing of it. That's all I know."

"Do you know why she came to South Wennock?"

"I believe to meet her husband. But there seemed to be some mystery connected with him, and she was not very communicative to me."

It seemed that this was nearly all Mrs. Smith knew. At least it was all she would say; and it threw little if any more light upon the past than Sir Stephen had known before. He left her with a recommendation to tell what she knew to the police.

"I dare say I shall," she said. "But I must take my own time over it. I have my reasons. It won't be my fault, sir, if the thing is not brought to light."

Sir Stephen was half-way down the garden with his son, when Mrs. Smith came running after him.

"Sir, you have forgotten: you have not taken your fee."

"I don't take fees in South Wennock," he said, with a smile. "Follow my direction, and you may give the child a little ease; but nothing can save him."

In going out at the gate they met Mr. Carlton, who was abroad early with his patients. What on earth had brought *them* there? was the question in his eyes, if not on his lips.

"You have been to see my patient!" he exclaimed aloud, in no conciliatory tone.

"Is it your patient?" cried Sir Stephen. "I declare I thought it was Lycett's, and I had no time to ask extraneous particulars. I have recommended a little change in the treatment and left a prescription; just to give ease: nothing else can be done."

He spoke in the carelessly authoritative manner of a physician accustomed to be obeyed; he meant no offence, nor dreamt of any; but it grated on the ear of Mr. Carlton.

"What brought you here at all?" he asked, really wondering what could have brought Sir Stephen to that particular place.

"Mrs. Smith sent for me," said Sir Stephen. "I suppose you know what child it is?"

"What child it is?" repeated the surgeon, after an almost imperceptible pause. "It won't be long here; I know that much, in spite of any physician's prescriptions."

"It is the child of that lady who died in Palace Street, where I attended for you. She who was killed by prussic acid."

"Nonsense," said Mr. Carlton.

"There's no nonsense about it," rejoined Sir Stephen. "Mrs. Smith tried to persuade me that I was wrong, but I convinced her to the contrary."

A change crossed the face of Mr. Carlton; a peculiar expression, not unlike that of a stag at bay. Lifting his eyes he caught those of Frederick Grey riveted upon his.

"Is it possible to recognize an infant after the lapse of years, do you think, Sir Stephen?"

"Not unless it is born with a distinguishing mark, as this was. I should know that boy if I met him in old age in the wilds of Africa."

"What is the mark?" asked Mr. Carlton, looking as if he doubted whether there was any at all.

"It's under the right arm, near the armpit; one you can't forget, once seen. Go and look at it."

They parted, shaking hands. Sir Stephen turned out at the gate, Mr. Carlton towards the door of the cottage. He had all but entered it, when he heard himself called by Sir Stephen.

"You had better make it known abroad that this is the same child, Mr. Carlton; it may eventually lead to a discovery. Perhaps Mrs. Smith will tell you more than she has told me. She says Mrs. Crane came to South Wennock to meet her husband; and I should think that very likely. Remember the fellow you saw hidden on the stairs!"

Sir Stephen had no need to say "Remember the fellow." That fellow was in Mr. Carlton's mind all too often for its own peace.

CHAPTER XIV.

STOLEN MOMENTS.

Lucy Chesney was going on to convalescence—as indeed was South Wennock generally. In less than a week after Sir Stephen's visit Lucy was able to leave her bed for a sofa.

Mr. Frederick Grey considered himself a very ill-used man. Never, except that one solitary time when she lay in imminent danger and did not know him, had he been admitted to see Lucy. But upon hearing from his Uncle John that she was sitting up, he went down forthwith to Mr. Carlton's.

Admitted by Jonathan, asking leave or licence of no one, he walked straight upstairs and knocked at Lucy's chamber. "Come in," answered Lucy's voice, and he went in and found her alone, lying on the sofa near the fire, dressed, and wrapped round with a silken coverlet.

The red flush flew into her white cheeks; but when the first moment of surprise was over, she held out her hand in token of welcome. Not a word was spoken by either. He passed his arm underneath the pillow on which she was lying and raised it up, bringing her fair young face closer to his own.

"Lucy, my whole life will be one of thankfulness!"

"Did you think I should die?"

"Yes, my darling, I did. I may tell you so now that all danger is over. Lucy, it must not be long before you are mine; I cannot risk another trial, such as this has been."

"Had I been yours ever so, you could not have guarded me from it," was her answer.

"Not from the illness; I am aware of that. But to know that you were ill—ill unto death, and not to be allowed to be with you—there was my trial. I do not care to tell you how badly I bore it; how I paced before the house, hour after hour, and night after night, watching its walls. Illness may come to you as my wife, Lucy, but it will be my right to tend you then; my right above any one's in the world. Sisters, nurses, friends—what are they compared with me?"

How delightful it was to lie there! In the sweet languor of convalescence, pressed to that manly heart, in those protecting arms! It was almost worth having been ill for. She looked up into his face with a tender smile.

"I shall always say you saved me, Frederick."

"I saved you! How?"

"By sending for Sir Stephen. Jane declares that soon after he entered, I seemed to grow calmer. He gave me something, a powder, she says, and changed the lotion for my head."

"Lucy, dear, he did nothing for you that my Uncle John and Mr. Carlton were not doing. The disorder was upon the turn when he arrived."

"I cannot part with my opinion; neither will Jane. It is pleasant to me to think that I owe my life to your father; or rather to you for having sent for him here."

"Keep the opinion, then," he whispered. "And take one truth to your heart, love—that you shall owe a very great portion of your future life's happiness to me. I will strive to make it, by God's blessing."

"Don't you think you have held me up long enough?" she presently said.

"Does it tire you? or hurt you?"

"Oh no. But you will be tired."

He raised his own face for a moment, that he might look into her eyes.

"Tired, did you say? I wish I might hold you here long enough to become tired."

Her gaze fell beneath the saucy glance that danced in his, and he bent his face to kiss away the blushes on her cheek. When people get into mischief, you know, they are nearly sure to be caught. There was a brisk knock at the door, and Mr. Carlton stood before them. A far brighter blush rose then, and she would have shrunk in maidenly timidity from the arms that encircled her.

But Frederick Grey altogether declined to let her do so. He kept her where she was, held to him, and raised his head with calm self-possession.

"What do you do here, Mr. Carlton?"

"Do!" returned Mr. Carlton. "It is my own house."

"Your own house, of course. But this is Lady Lucy's room."

It seemed quite impossible for those two to meet without something unpleasant taking place between them, some little interchange of compliments indicative of incipient warfare. Frederick Grey gently laid Lucy down, and stood upright by her side, his tall form drawn to its full height.

"As my sister-in-law's medical attendant, and as her guardian so long as she is under my roof, perhaps you will allow me to inquire what *you* do here," retorted Mr. Carlton, turning the tables. "I speak in her behalf when I say that in my opinion it is scarcely seemly behaviour on your part."

"You will allow me to be the judge of that," coolly returned the young man. "As my future wife, none can have a greater interest than I, in guarding her from all danger."

He drew a chair nearer to the sofa as he spoke, and sat down; an intimation that he entertained no intention of quitting the room. Lucy, her face still crimson, spoke.

"Did you want anything, Mr. Carlton?"

"I came to bring these powders, Lucy," was his reply, as he laid two small white papers on the table by her side. "You complained of heartburn this morning: take one in a wine-glass of water now, and the second later in the day; they will relieve you."

"Thank you," she replied. "I will take it presently."

Judith was in the room then, having entered it in time to hear what passed. Mr. Carlton left, not choosing probably to make further demur to the presence of the intrusive guest, lest it might disturb Lucy; and Frederick Grey took up the powders and examined them.

"Have you suffered from heartburn, Lucy?"

"I think so. I had a hot, disagreeable sensation in my throat this morning, and Mr. Carlton said it was heartburn. I never had it before."

He wetted his finger, and tasted the powder. Then he folded up the papers and handed them to Judith.

"Put these away, Judith. They will do Lady Lucy no good."

"Am I not to take them?" inquired Lucy.

"No. I will send you a better remedy than that.

Judith received the powders from him very carefully, as if she feared they might bite her, and left the room with them, meeting Lady Jane at the door, who was coming into it. Frederick laughed, and made the best excuse he could for being there without permission.

When he was leaving the house, half-an-hour later, Mr. Carlton came forth, and met him face to face on the stairs.

"A moment, Mr. Frederick Grey, if you please. It may be well that you and I should come to an understanding. You appear to assume that you may do just as you please with me: you enter my house, you interfere in my affairs: this shall not be."

"The Ladies Chesney are temporary inmates of your house, and my visits are to them," was the answer. "I have not troubled it much."

"I must request you to trouble it less for the future. I am not accustomed to these underhand proceedings, and I don't like them."

"Underhand!" exclaimed Frederick Grey in surprise.

"I don't choose that my patients should be tampered with. When I become incapable of taking care of them, it will be time enough for others to interfere. It was a very unwarrantable liberty, that visit of Sir Stephen Grey's to the sick boy at Tupper's cottage."

Frederick quite laughed. "You must ask Mrs. Smith to settle that with you. She sent for Sir Stephen, and I walked up with him. I did no more. I did not see the boy. As to interfering with you, Mr. Carlton, I am not conscious of having done so. I have desired Lady Lucy not to take those powders you brought her just now; so far I certainly have interfered. But you should remember in what relation she stands to me."

"And, pray, why have you desired her not to take the powders?"

"Because I don't think they are the best remedy for heartburn. I told her I would send her something else."

"You are cool, sir," returned Mr. Carlton, all his old hatred of Frederick Grey rising to fever heat. And in point of fact there was a particularly cool, indifferent tone pervading Frederick Grey's behaviour towards the surgeon, which might easily be discerned and was anything but pleasant. "You and I will have a long account to settle some day."

"It may be as well, perhaps, that we never come to the settlement," was the answer. "I do not force it on: always remember that, Mr. Carlton; I do not force it on. There has been no good

feeling between you and me for years, as you are aware; but that is no reason why we should quarrel every time we meet. I have had no intention of offending you in thus intruding into your house —and I acknowledge that it is an intrusion, antagonistic to each other as you and I are, and if you will so far allow me I would beg you in courtesy to pardon me under the circumstances. I will try and not enter it again. In a day or two I expect the ladies will have left it for their own home."

He made a movement to pass as he concluded; Mr. Carlton did not oppose it, and the fray ended. But no sooner had both disappeared than Judith emerged from a store-closet hard by, in which she had been an unwilling prisoner. She came out with a pot of jam in her hand, and a frightened face: anything like quarrelling was sure to startle Judith.

Lady Laura Carlton was still in her room, making believe to be yet an invalid. She liked the indulgence of recovery; the being petted with attentions and fed with good things, jellies and wines and dainty messes. She would rise towards midday, cause herself to be becomingly attired, enter her dressing-room, and remain there for the rest of the day. Lady Jane had to divide her time pretty equally between Laura and Lucy, now that Lucy was getting well, for Laura was jealous and exacting.

Laura's frame of mind did not altogether tend to advance perfect recovery; at least, not if repose were essential to it. That suspicion of hers, connecting her husband with the inmates of Tupper's cottage, had only grown the stronger in the condemned seclusion of the last week or two. On Laura Carlton's heart there was an ever-burning sense of deep humiliation. Broken allegiance to a man's marriage vows does reflect its humiliation on the wife; and Laura deeply felt its sting. Unduly conscious of her birth and title, of the place she held amidst the nobodies of the provincial town, remembering how impassioned had been her love for Mr. Carlton, how entirely in the early days of her wedded life she had given this love up to him, it cannot be wondered that she felt the defalcation to her heart's core. Jealousy, rage, a thirst for redress, were ever at battle within her. She longed to fling back the shame on Mr. Carlton: that is, to bring him to self-humiliation. She wished to find something tangible of which to accuse him; proofs that he could neither ignore nor dispute. She cherished a vision of seeing him at her feet, suing for pardon, for reconciliation, abjectly, his head in the dust: or else that she would take a high ground, and say, I leave you, I am your wife no longer.

Not yet had Lady Jane spoken to Mr. Carlton on the subject of Clarice, or asked him whether he could or could not give her any information about the past. The surgeon's time had been so fully

occupied, and her own anxiety for Lucy so great, that not a moment's opportunity had presented itself since Jane's sojourn in the house. But Jane was seeking one now. Perfect courtesy—it may indeed be said cordiality—had existed between them during Jane's stay, though from the causes mentioned they had met but little. And when they did meet, it had been chiefly in Lucy's sick-room. But the time was coming on, and events were thickening.

CHAPTER XV.

ANOTHER SHOCK FOR MR. CARLTON.

LADY LAURA sat before her dressing-room fire, leaning back in an easy-chair, her feet on a low velvet ottoman to catch the warmth of the blaze. Her elbows rested on the arms of the chair, the tips of her fingers were pressed together, and her eyes were bent in thought. In point of fact the Lady Laura was buried deeply in her wrongs, real and imaginary: as was the case now three parts of her time. It was the day mentioned in the last chapter, when Mr. Frederick Grey intruded into Lucy's room; a short time after that agreeable moment in Judith's life when she had emerged from the closet, jam-pot in hand.

Seated at the window, bearing Laura company, was Lady Jane. She was knitting a pair of the sort of woollen mittens that she used to knit for her father. These were for Mr. Carlton. Winter weather had come on, and he had complained one day in Jane's hearing of cold at his wrists when he had to go out at night. Jane immediately offered to knit him a pair of these soft woollen things, and had set to work upon them.

Not to Laura, any more than to Mr. Carlton, had Jane spoken of Clarice. Laura's impatience during her sickness had prevented this. She never seemed in a frame of mind to hear anything serious. To-day, however, Laura was at least outwardly calm; and Jane seized upon the opportunity as she sat there. She began by telling her of the last interview with Mrs. West, and Laura listened with apathy enough, as if it were no concern of hers, until aroused by the particulars that led Mrs. West to infer that Clarice must have married.

"Married!" exclaimed Laura, turning her head quickly to her sister.

"By what Mrs. West said—as I have now repeated to you—I think there can be no doubt of it. Indeed, Clarice admitted it was so when the servant met her."

"Oh, well, I think all that is proof enough," remarked Laura.

"So it seems I was not the only one of the family to consult my own inclination—dreadful conduct as you and papa thought it in me! And pray, Jane, who was the gentleman?"

"About that there is less certainty," said Jane. "Circumstances point strongly—at least in my opinion—to its having been a brother of Mr. West's, a young medical man. He was staying there, was very intimate with Clarice, and in the following winter embarked for India. Mrs. West does not think this. She argues that Mr. Tom West was open-hearted, was his own master, and would have married Clarice openly had he married her at all. She feels certain that they did not sail together, however it may have been. But it appears to me that Clarice could not have been in a condition of health to embark, and would probably follow him later."

"Nothing more likely. But why—being safely married—should she not have told us? Had she feared interference to prevent it, she could not have feared interference to separate them when it was done."

"True," said Lady Jane. "I have pondered it all over until I am ill and weary. At all events, this is a little clue to work upon. And now I must tell you who may possibly help us in it—Mr. Carlton."

"How should he help?" asked Laura in surprise. "I have never spoken to him of Clarice. To confess that a sister went out as a governess and was lost, was not pleasant—and you have heard me say this before. I have never opened my lips about Clarice to Mr. Carlton. My first silence has induced my continued silence, if you can understand that."

Jane explained. In the old days Mr. Carlton was intimate at Mrs. West's: was a friend of Tom West's, of a Mr. Crane, and of other young medical men who visited there. "It is just possible Mr. Carlton might have known something of the marriage, and of their subsequent movements," she concluded. Laura did not acquiesce.

"Really, Jane, there seems very little use in bringing up this uncertainty about Clarice," she fretfully exclaimed. "As I say, it does not add to the dignity of the Chesneys."

"I will not rest, now, until I have found out Clarice—if she is to be found," replied Jane in some agitation. "This information of Mrs. West's has given me a fresh impetus; and my father left her to me. She may yet be living; may be in poverty, for all we know, and unwilling to apply to us. Or," she added, lowering her voice, "or if dead herself, she may have left a child or children. I *must* inquire of Mr. Carlton, Laura, in spite of your prejudices and your pride."

"Inquire if you like," returned Laura ungraciously. "You always

seem to speak as if there were some dark mystery attaching to this business, apart from the bare loss of Clarice," she continued, in a condemning sort of way.

"It invariably presents itself as a mystery to my own mind," said Jane, and her tone certainly did sound gloomy enough as she spoke. "A mystery which I seem to shrink from. You know that little lame boy at Tupper's cottage?"

"Well?" returned Laura, after a pause and a stare.

"I cannot divest myself of the idea that that child is Clarice's."

Up started Lady Laura. Flinging from her knees a warm covering which had been placed there, she stamped up and down the room in excitement, forgetting her rôle of invalid.

"That child Clarice's! For shame, Jane! That child is—is—yes, I *will* speak out! That child is Mr. Carlton's."

Jane sat, unable to speak, aghast at her vehemence; her words.

"Mr. Carlton's! Nay, Laura, I think it is you who should cry shame. What wild notion can have taken possession of you?"

Laura, ten times more vehement, more excited than before, reiterated her assertion. She was in the midst of her tirade—directed against Mr. Carlton and mankind in general—when Judith came in. Laura, uncontrollable as was ever her father when overmastered by passion, seized the girl by the arm.

"You know that child at Tupper's cottage, Judith? I have heard of Lady Jane sending you there. Who is he like?"

Judith stood in dismay. She tried to parry the question. Lady Laura shook her arm.

"My lady, it's well known there's no accounting for likenesses. Two people that never were within miles of each other in their lives may be alike."

"Of course they may be," sarcastically retorted Lady Laura. "*Will* you answer me, Judith?"

"And sometimes are," interposed Jane with composure. "A likeness alone proves nothing. But you had better speak at once, Judith."

"My ladies, the likeness I saw could only be accidental," said Judith, still avoiding a direct answer. "It may exist in my fancy only."

Laura stamped her foot. "You must speak, Judith," said Lady Jane. "Like whom do you think the child?"

"Like Mr. Carlton," was the low reply.

Lady Jane stood dumb. It was anything but the answer she had expected, for she had believed Laura's notion to be pure fancy. A triumphant glance shot from Laura's eyes, and certain ill-advised words dropped from her lips. The avowal seemed so complete a confirmation of her suspicions, that she looked upon the case as proved against Mr. Carlton.

She sat down in her chair again, battling with the jealous anger that was causing her bosom to heave and throb tumultuously. Jane repudiated the idea, repudiated it utterly, whatever accidental resemblance might exist to Mr. Carlton. She turned to Judith. As so much had been spoken before the girl, it was well that more should be said.

"We had a sister who was lost, Judith—you once before heard me allude to her. She has never been heard of; but latterly I have learned facts which induce me to conclude that she married. In that little child at Tupper's cottage I trace a very great likeness to her, and I cannot divest myself of the idea that it must be her child. Laura, don't *you* see how feasible it is? Clarice may have gone abroad with her husband, leaving her child in England at nurse."

For once a tinge of colour came into Judith's white face. "*What* name did you say, my lady? *Clarice?*"

"Clarice," repeated Jane in surprise, for the emphasis was involuntary. "Lady Clarice. Why?"

Judith turned away. "Oh, nothing, my lady; nothing. I thought the name uncommon."

"It is rather uncommon. We have some reason to think she married a Mr. West: a gentleman who afterwards went abroad and died. What are you looking at, Judith?"

The girl had turned again, in open genuine surprise this time. "I once knew a Mr. West, my lady; a gentleman who was visiting old Mrs. Jenkinson in Palace Street, where my sister lives. He was Mrs. Jenkinson's nephew."

"Was his name Thomas?" asked Jane eagerly.

"I don't know, my lady. I can't remember. Margaret could tell me."

"And what was he? Had he any profession?"

Judith shook her head. Margaret knew, no doubt, she said: she would inquire of her, if her lady pleased.

Her lady did please, and told her to do so. But Lady Jane did not think much of this: West was rather a common name.

This same afternoon at dusk, Mr. Carlton was in his surgery alone, preparing some mixture for Lucy—for her medicines had been supplied by him, not by Mr. Grey. It grew too dark to measure the proportions with exactness, and he lighted one of the gas-burners. The flame went flaring up, and Mr. Carlton turned to the counter again, which was under the window, and took a bottle into his hand.

Reader, when your room has been lighted up, and the window left exposed, have you ever felt a dread, a horror of what you might witness there?—Of seeing something unearthly, or what you may fear as such, standing outside the glass, and peering in? I believe that

it is a sensation which has been experienced by many, causing them to drag down the blind, or to order the shutters to be closed with all speed. Was it this feeling which induced Mr. Carlton to look up from his employment, at the window before him? Or was his mind guided by some subtle instinct, whispering that some one was there?

The face, imperfectly seen, was pressed against the glass, immediately facing him: that dread face, with its white complexion and its black whiskers, and the dark handkerchief round its chin, terrible to Mr. Carlton's reminiscence. It appeared to be eagerly watching, not himself, but his movements, as he made up the medicine.

Mr. Carlton, impassive Mr. Carlton, found that he had nerves for once in his life. He cried out in the moment's impulse; a wild cry, not unlike that of a sea-gull, and the glass jar dropped from his hand to the floor and was shivered into fragments. Mr. Jefferson rushed in to see his principal staring at the surgery window, and all the good syrup of taraxacum spilled and wasted.

CHAPTER XVI.

MISS STIFFING'S EXPEDITION.

DECEMBER came in. On a cold, bitter evening, a night or two after the above, a young woman might have been seen hurrying through the streets of South Wennock. She wore a warm cloak, and kept her black Shetland veil tightly over her face, for the wind was howling and the sleet was beating. It was Miss Stiffing, Lady Laura Carlton's maid.

"Such a freak of my lady's!" she grumbled discontentedly, as she went along. "Sending one out in this pelting weather! But that's just like her! She takes a thing into her head, and then it must be done off-hand, convenient or unconvenient. Bother take that cupboard! What did she go and lose the key for, if she wants it opened?"

She reached a locksmith's shop and turned into it. It was lighted only by a solitary candle, and that placed so as to give little light beyond the counter. Consequently the maid stumbled over some fire-irons that stood out from the wall. They came down with a run, and she nearly came down with them.

"Now then! Why the plague, White, can't you keep your shop free for folks to enter?" she testily exclaimed, whilst the unoffending locksmith hastened round, and meekly picked up his property.

"Is it you, Miss Stiffing? And how are you, ma'am?"

"Why, I'm as cranky as those bell-rests of yours, that's what I am," returned Miss Stiffing. "She has no more consideration than

an owl, hasn't my lady. Fancy her sending me slopping in my thin shoes through the streets to-night!"

"Couldn't you put on boots?" asked the locksmith, sensibly.

"No, I couldn't. When one's dressed for the evening one doesn't want to be bothered changing shoes and boots. And you, White! why don't you have gas in your shop, like other Christians?"

"I can't afford it, Miss Stiffing. And I mostly work in the back room by candle-light; the shop's so precious cold in winter. What can I do for you, miss?"

"I want a skeleton key."

"A skeleton key!" repeated the tradesman.

"Yes, a skeleton key. Is there anything so odd in that? If I had said a skeleton, you might stare, perhaps."

"What is it for?" he asked, scratching his head, and trying to remember whether the law allowed skeleton keys to be handed over indiscriminately to servants.

"Well, it's for my lady, if you must get to the bottom of everything. She goes and loses the key of the big cupboard, that stands in the recess by her bedroom door. 'Where's the key of that cupboard?' says she to me, this afternoon. 'My lady, it's in the keyhole,' says I. 'It's not,' says she; 'you just go and find it.' Upon that I called to mind that I had put the key into her key-drawer only yesterday morning, and I told her so, but it can't be found. Of course she has gone and lost it herself."

"I dare say it's only mislaid," remarked the man.

"Nothing else in the world; dropped down, perhaps, behind the furniture, or something of that sort, and will be found in the morning. I said so to my lady. But no, not a minute's waiting will do for her. She must have the door opened to-night, and off she sends me here for a skeleton key. 'I won't have the lock picked or damaged, in case the key does turn up,' says she. 'Tell White to send me a skeleton key, one that will pick any lock of about that size, and he shall have it back in a day or two.' And so off I came. And now, just look sharp, for I'd like to get home again to the fire."

"I'd have sent one of the men-servants."

"I dare say you would; but you don't live under Lady Laura Carlton. If I told another servant to go when she had sent me, I might pack my boxes. Is this the article? It looks simple enough."

"It's simple enough, miss," said the man, as he proceeded to explain its use. "And it's good night to you, and wishing you a pleasanter walk back again, Miss Stiffing."

"Which you must be an idiot to wish," irascibly returned Miss Stiffing. "Is the sleet and rain falling incessant, likely to make it pleasanter?"

The young woman made her way home as speedily as circum-

stances and her shoes permitted. Lady Laura Carlton was waiting for her in her dressing-room; waiting impatiently, as might be seen. What project was in her mind that night, flushing her cheeks to emotion, rendering her eyes restless? Could it be that these external signs of agitation were caused by the simple mislaying of a key?—and the key of a place that was not in particular request?

"What a time you have been, Stiffing!" she exclaimed, as the maid entered.

"Time, my lady!" returned Stiffing, whose manner and voice, be it remarked, were subdued to meekness in Lady Laura's presence, whatever they might be out of it. "I went as quickly as the sleet and slush allowed me; and this is what White has sent. Shall I open the cupboard now, my lady?"

"No," sharply answered Lady Laura. "It is time for my port-wine jelly."

Stiffing went down, muttering something about caprice, and brought up a small mould of dark jelly on a handsome glass dish, a glass plate, and a teaspoon. As she was putting the things on the sofa table before her mistress, Lady Laura looked at her.

"I cannot think how you could have been so carelessly stupid as to lose the key!"

"All I can say, my lady, is that I put it into the key-drawer yesterday morning. I am as positive of it——"

"That will do, Stiffing," interrupted Lady Laura. "It is of no use to go over the old assertion again. You can go down, and get warm after your walk. I shall not want you for at least an hour. When I do, I'll ring. And, Stiffing, you will not forget the injunction I gave you—to hold your tongue. I won't allow the servants to know that I admit skeleton keys into my house: it might teach some of them tricks."

Stiffing departed, saying she would remember: and she meant to keep her word. With all Lady Laura's exactions and caprice, she was a generous mistress, and the servants liked her. Stiffing made herself comfortable in the servants' sitting-room before a blazing fire. They seemed curious to know what had taken her out. "Only a little errand for my lady," was the indifferent answer. They were all shut up snugly enough there, and Judith was with them. Lady Jane was with Lucy, and Mr. Carlton had gone out.

The stairs were creaking—as stairs *will* creak when a stealthy footstep is upon them, and the house is in silence. They were the back-stairs; and, cautiously descending them, a thick black silk scarf tied over her head, and a shawl muffled round her, to guard against cold, was Lady Laura Carlton, bearing the skeleton key. The stairs were dark, for those back-stairs were never lighted, and she felt her way by the balustrades. They brought her in time to

the cellar. She groped her way through it, entered the room beyond, and struck a light. She struck the match and lighted the taper she had brought down from her writing-table. Laura! Laura Carlton! what are you about to do? To pry into your husband's private affairs, into things which he deems it right and fitting to keep from you? Take care. Secrets, dishonourably sought out, rarely benefit the seeker.

She was not in a mood to take care. Had a very angel from heaven appeared to warn her against what she was doing, she had scarcely heeded it. In her present state of exasperation she cared not what the result might be. What precise secrets or mementos Mr. Carlton kept in that iron safe before her, she knew not; her suspicions were absolutely vague; but the idea had taken possession of her that something or other might be ferreted out of it, and it was only her illness which had caused her to delay the search. The doubt arose simply from that trifling act of Mr. Carlton's—that closing hastily of the safe-door the day Laura penetrated to the cellar. From that hour she had determined to open it. Not that she supposed the contents of the iron safe would help her in the particular suspicion she had lately taken up: not at all. Though there was little doubt that the unwilling avowal regarding the likeness, drawn recently from Judith, had helped to work her mind up to its present state of rebellion.

Is it not remarkable to trace the chain of events, so trivial in themselves, by which the detection of crime is sometimes worked out? Twelve months before, an accidental circumstance had made Laura Carlton familiar with the use of a skeleton key. She attached no importance to the knowledge—how should she? and yet, but for that circumstance, she might never have succeeded in opening that safe in her husband's cellar.

She did open it now: readily; and she stood the taper, in its elegant glass holder, inside, while her eyes ranged over its contents. There were two shelves: the upper one appeared to be filled with chemical matters, and the lower one partially.

Near to her hand was a cash-box, locked; and there was a small note-case, not locked, for the very good reason that there was no lock to it.

Lady Laura took up the cash-box, rather a large one, and shook it. If it contained money, it must have been bank-notes, for neither gold nor silver rattled. She put it down again, and opened the note-case. To describe her disappointment when she found it contained what she emphatically termed "rubbish," would be a difficult task. Scraps of writing, Latin and Greek: some receipted bills of a bygone date; various private memoranda, not of a nature to bear upon her jealous fears; two or three prescriptions bearing

the names of celebrated physicians; a receipt for compounding "sherbet," and another for walnut catsup. In short, by the cursory glance afforded to Lady Laura in her haste, it appeared to contain neither more nor less than worthless scraps of paper.

She was closing it with a petulant gesture, when her eye fell upon an opening in the leather, and she found there a pocket which had escaped her notice. Pulling it apart, a note lay disclosed; nothing else; and she took it out.

"Lewis Carlton, Esq.," was the address, and Lady Laura thrust it into her pocket for perusal at her leisure. But a sudden recollection flashed upon her, and she took it out again, to devour the address with her eyes. If ever she had seen the handwriting of her sister Clarice, she thought she saw it then. But there was not time to satisfy herself now, for she stood upon thorns, metaphorically speaking, and she returned it to her pocket.

She placed the note-case in its former position. She took the taper in her hand and held it so that its rays fell on the upper shelf; but nothing was really there, except what concerned his profession. Nothing else was on the lower shelf, except the cash-box, and some bundles of receipted bills. Lady Laura was thinking how much she should like to see inside the cash-box, when Mr. Carlton's voice on the stairs startled her.

Startled her nearly out of her senses. What she did, in her terror, she scarcely knew. He was evidently coming down, but had halted momentarily to call out some order to one of the servants in the distance, or to the surgery boy. Instinct caused Lady Laura to gaze round for a hiding-place, and she espied a barrel in a corner. She blew out the light, grasped the crystal candlestick and the skeleton key, pushed-to the safe-door firmly, and crouched down between the barrel and the wall, her heart beating as it had never yet beat in all her life.

She would almost rather die than that he should discover her; for although she had not shrunk from committing the act, to be detected during its actual perpetration would be more than her pride could well endure. Laura was honourable by nature. Yes, she was so, however you may feel inclined to demur to the assertion, seeing what you do see. She hated meanness as much as ever did the late earl; and to be detected in *this*, to be caught in its actual perpetration, would be a blow to her self-esteem for ever. In that moment there flashed a faint view on her mind of the wrong she was committing, of how utterly unjustifiable it was, how despicable its nature.

Mr. Carlton came in, a candle in his hand. Drawing from his pocket a bunch of keys, he inserted one into the lock. But he found the lock was not fastened.

"Why—what the deuce!" he uttered, half aloud and in careless tones. "Did *I* leave it so?"

And then, as if a suspicion occurred to him, he turned and peered round the room. His wife saw it, and she felt sick nearly unto death, lest he should discern her.

But she cowered in the shadow of the dark corner. Moreover, her dress was dark, and his eye passed her over. He next turned his attention to the lock, but could find nothing the matter with it. He then applied himself to the object he had come for, which appeared to be some chemical apparatus, for he began moving the different things about on the upper shelf, in order to get at a glass cylinder.

He held it in his hand, when the voice of his assistant was heard, speaking down the stairs.

"Are you there, Mr. Carlton?"

"Yes," responded the surgeon. "Anything wanted?"

"That child at Tupper's cottage is taken worse; dying, they think."

"And the sooner it dies the better," was Mr. Carlton's rejoinder to himself, in a voice of pity. "I can't do it any good, poor little fellow, or ease its pain.—Who has come?" he called aloud.

"Only a neighbour," replied Mr. Jefferson. "Perhaps you would like to hear what she says."

"Coming," said Mr. Carlton.

He put down the cylinder, left the safe-door open, and went up; intending, no doubt, to return in a twinkling. As his footsteps died away, Lady Laura sprang from her hiding-place, and winged her flight up the stairs. She succeeded in gaining the top of the cellar stairs, and noiselessly stole round a corner which would take her to the others. A few paces from her was the surgery door, and she heard voices within. At a time of less terror, she might have stopped to listen, hearing where the messenger came from; but her own safety was above every consideration now; even above her jealous surmises. Arrived in her room, she sat there panting, not knowing whether she should faint or not.

She took some of the jelly, which still remained on the table, and leaned back in her easy-chair to rest. After a while, it must have been nearly half-an-hour, when her heart had ceased to beat so violently, she rose from her chair, felt in her pocket, and drew something out of it.

It was the missing key, the key of the cupboard. Had it been snugly reposing there all the time? What would Miss Stiffing have said? Lady Laura calmly unlocked the cupboard, leaving the door open, and then carried the key into her bedroom, and dropped it in a quiet nook on the floor, close to the key-drawer, where Miss

Stiffing's eyes would be charmed with its sight the first thing in the morning.

She sat down by the fire again, and opened the note; the note whose superscription was in the handwriting of her sister Clarice. But ere she had well glanced at its contents she was interrupted by the sudden entrance of Lady Jane.

"Lucy is asleep," said Jane, "and I think I shall go to bed. You do not want me this evening, Laura?"

"I don't want you," returned Laura impatiently, wishing Jane had not disturbed her before her curiosity was satisfied. "What do you want to go to bed at ten o'clock for? It's not even that yet."

"I feel so very tired. My head aches, too. Now that I am at ease as to Lucy, I begin to feel the fatigue and anxiety of the past week or two. Good night, Laura."

"Good night," carelessly returned Laura, feverishly impatient to get to her letter. "I shall be going to bed myself soon."

But Jane had scarcely gone out when Mr. Carlton came in, and Laura had to crush the stolen letter into her pocket again.

He sat down wearily, opposite Laura. He had been very busy all day, and had now come from a hasty visit to Tupper's cottage.

"How do you feel to-night, Laura?"

"Oh, pretty well," was Laura's answer; and the consciousness of the fraud she committed on him made her rather more civil than she had been of late. "You seem tired, Lewis."

"Tired to weariness," responded Mr. Carlton. "People are all getting better; but I'm sure it hardly looks like it, for they have been more exacting to-day than when they were in danger."

"You were not home to dinner, were you?"

"No; I am going to take some now. Ought you not to be in bed, Laura?"

"I don't know; I think I am tired of bed," she answered fretfully. "I shall go soon."

He laughed pleasantly. "You are tired with having too little to do, I with having too much. Laura, I think we both want a change. It shall not be long now before we leave South Wennock."

He sat a few minutes longer, and then went down. Laura once more brought forth her letter, and took the precaution to bolt the door.

"Perhaps I shall be at peace now!" she cried in resentful tones. In peace to read it, so far; but certainly not in peace afterwards; for the contents puzzled her to torment. She turned it about, she read it twice, she studied the superscription, she compared it with the lines themselves: at first to no purpose.

And finally she came to the conclusion that the letter had not been written to Mr. Carlton, although addressed to him, but to Mr. Tom West. And that Mr. Tom West had married Clarice.

CHAPTER XVII.

A LITTLE LIGHT.

LADY JANE CHESNEY sat before her dressing-glass, having her hair brushed by Judith, preparatory to retiring to rest, when they were interrupted by the entrance of Lady Laura.

"Jane, I want a little talk with you," she said, sitting down by the bright fire. "Bring your chair round to the warmth."

"I thought you said you were going to bed," observed Jane.

"I don't feel tired. Excitement is as good to me as rest, and I have had an exciting evening, taking one thing with another. Jane, you were right about Clarice."

"Right in what way?" returned Jane eagerly. "Have you questioned Mr. Carlton?"

"Shall I leave the room, my lady, and come back presently?" inquired Judith of her mistress, pausing with the hair-brush in her hand.

"No," interposed Lady Laura. "There's something to puzzle out, and I think you may perhaps help us, Judith. I have not questioned Mr. Carlton, Jane, but in—in—" Laura coughed slightly, as though her throat troubled her—"in rummaging over some of his waste places to-night, I came upon a note. A note written by Clarice."

Involuntarily Jane thought of the scrap of paper, the part of a note written by Clarice, which Laura had "come upon" once before.

"It is written to her husband," continued Laura. "That Tom West, I suppose. And it proves that she came to South Wennock, and that Mr. Carlton must have attended her. Only think, Jane, to South Wennock! She must have been visiting at Mrs. Jenkinson's, I fancy, where Judith's sister lives, for the note is dated from Palace Street. I will read it to you, Jane."

"13, *Palace Street, South Wennock,*
"*Friday Evening, March* 10, 1848.

"MY DEAREST HUSBAND,—You will be surprised to hear of my journey, and that I am safe at South Wennock. I know you will be angry, but I cannot help it, and we will talk over things when we meet. I have asked the people here about a medical man, and they strongly recommend one of the Messrs. Grey, but I tell them I would prefer Mr. Carlton. What do you say? I must ask him to come and see me this evening, for the railway omnibus shook me dreadfully, and I feel anything but well. *I know he will come, and without delay.*

"It was unreasonable of you, my darling husband, to wish me to be ill so far away. I felt that I could not do so; I should have died; and that's why I have disobeyed you. I can go back again when all's well over, if things still turn out unfortunately for the avowal of our marriage. No harm can come of it, for I have not given our name, and you must ask for me by the one you and Mr. West were so fond of calling me in sport.

"Lose no time; be here in half-an-hour if you can, for I feel really ill; and believe me,

"Ever your loving wife,
"CLARICE."

"I have heard part of that note before!" was on the tip of Judith's tongue. But some feeling prompted her to arrest the words ere they were spoken. Lady Jane took the note and read it to herself in silence, pondering over each word.

"It is incomprehensible to me," she at length said, drawing the envelope from Laura, and looking at it. "Why, this is addressed to Mr. Carlton!" she burst forth.

"It must have come into his possession in some way. Perhaps he and Tom West had their envelopes and letters mixed together," returned Laura with composure. "I suppose there's no doubt now that it was Tom West she married. Judith says he used to visit his aunt in Palace Street—old Mrs. Jenkinson,—and the letter's dated from thence.. If—Judith, what on earth's the matter with you?"

"Thank you, my lady," replied Judith, who looked white and faint. "I feel a little ill. It will pass off directly."

"It is evident that Clarice must have come to South Wennock without her husband's consent," resumed Laura, tossing a bottle of smelling-salts to Judith. "I suppose he was stopping at Mrs. Jenkinson's. Her number is thirteen, is it not, Judith?"

"No, my lady, Mrs. Jenkinson's number is fourteen," replied Judith in a low tone.

"Oh, well, a mistake's readily made in a number. Clarice must have——"

"Laura, I am all at sea," interrupted Lady Jane. "Why should Clarice have come to South Wennock at all, unless she came with him? This note would seem to imply that he lived at South Wennock, but—he never lived here, did he, Judith?"

"Who, my lady? Mr. West? No, he never lived here," was Judith's reply; but the girl looked remarkably uneasy. Did she fear being asked questions which she could not answer?

"It could not have been Tom West that Clarice married," said Jane. "This note is dated March, and he sailed for India in February."

"My ladies," spoke up Judith, "I have inquired of my sister Margaret whether young Mr. West's name was Thomas. She says it was not Thomas, but Robert. And she also says he was married several years ago to a Miss Pope, and they live somewhere in Gloucestershire."

"Then that disposes of the affair, so far as he is concerned," cried Laura, with wondering eyes. "How much difficulty it appears to be encompassed with!"

"Not quite," said Jane. "Robert West may have been a brother. Do you know, Judith? And do you know whether Robert was a surgeon?"

"Robert West was not in any profession, my lady. He was an independent gentleman. I don't think he had a brother. Margaret says he had not."

"Laura, I cannot rest," said Jane, starting from a pause given to thought. "I shall go now and speak to Mr. Carlton. I ought to have applied to him before."

Causing her hair to be smoothed under one of her plain white net morning caps, Jane proceeded to the dining-room. Mr. Carlton was in an easy-chair before the fire, solacing himself with a cigar, which, as a visiting medical man, he only ventured upon at night—and that not very often. He threw it into the fire, with a word of apology, when he saw Lady Jane.

"Pardon me for disturbing you at this hour," she said, taking the chair he handed to her; "but I am in great want of some information which I think you can afford me—very anxious about it, in short. Some years ago you were, I believe, intimate with a family living in Gloucester Terrace, Hyde Park, of the name of West. Can you tell me whether Tom West married my sister?"

No pen could adequately describe Mr. Carlton's countenance. It was one of blank consternation; first—as it appeared—at being charged with having known the Wests, next at being questioned about Lady Jane's sister.

"I can't tell anything about it," he said at length, with the air of a man bewildered.

"I hope you can, Mr. Carlton. Perhaps I have not been sufficiently explicit. You were a friend of Tom West's, were you not?"

"I certainly knew him," he replied, after a pause. "Not much; that is, it was only a passing acquaintance. He went out to India, and I believe died there."

"Not much!" repeated Jane; "Mrs. West told me you were there frequently. You used to see her cousins there, and my sister. We have a suspicion that my sister married Thomas West. Were you cognizant of it?"

The same blank look reigned in Mr. Carlton's face.

"I really do not understand you, Lady Jane. I never saw a sister of yours at Mrs. West's. What sister?"

"You saw Miss Beauchamp?"

He suddenly rose, and seizing the poker, began knocking the fire about.

"Well?" said he.

"I speak of Miss Beauchamp. She was my sister."

He turned sharply, poker in hand.

"Miss Beauchamp! What farce is it that you wish to play upon me, Lady Jane?"

"No farce at all," replied Jane sadly. "She dropped our name when she went out as governess—not to disgrace it, she said—retaining only that of Beauchamp. She was our sister, Clarice Beauchamp Chesney."

A strange expression was on Mr. Carlton's face, but he kept it turned from Lady Jane.

"We know that Clarice married," proceeded Jane, "and we can only think she must have married Tom West. Had he a brother Robert, do you know?"

"Had who a brother Robert?" asked Mr. Carlton.

"Tom West."

"Tom West had no brother Robert, that I am aware of. I never knew any one of the name of Robert West."

"What name did my sister go by when she was here, at South Wennock?" continued Jane. "You can tell me that."

"She never was at South Wennock."

"Mr. Carlton! She was, and you must know it. She sent for you, did she not, to attend her the night she arrived: sent for you to Palace Street?"

Down clattered the poker. Was it an accident, or were Mr. Carlton's hands shaking? As he stooped to pick it up, Jane caught a glimpse of his face: either it was unusually pale or the firelight deceived her. Another moment, and he had put the poker in its place, and was turning to Lady Jane and speaking quietly.

"I know nothing of your sister; nothing whatever. Why should you think I do!—Why do you apply to me?"

The precise why and wherefore Jane could not answer, for she had given a hasty promise to Laura not to speak of the note the latter had produced.

"When my sister came to South Wennock to stay with old Mrs. Jenkinson, we have reason to believe that you attended her, Mr. Carlton. I want to know by what name she then went."

Again astonishment appeared to be Mr. Carlton's prevailing emotion. It seemed that he could not understand.

"I protest, Lady Jane, you are asking me things that I know

nothing of. I never was inside Mrs. Jenkinson's house in my life. John Grey attends there."

"Clarice would not have the Greys; Clarice preferred you: and Clarice was there. Was she not confined in Palace Street?"

Mr. Carlton raised his hand to his brow. "What mistake you are labouring under, I cannot tell," he presently said. "I know nothing of what you are asking me. I know nothing of your sister, or her health, or her movements, and I know as little of Mrs. Jenkinson."

"You knew Miss Beauchamp at Mrs. West's?" rejoined Jane.

"I used to see a lady there of that name, I remember,—the Wests' governess," he replied. "Surely, Lady Jane, you must make some strange mistake in calling her your sister?"

"She was indeed our sister, Mr. Carlton. Laura, it seems, has never liked to mention the subject of Clarice to you, but we have been searching for her all these years."

"Why has she not liked to mention it?" interrupted Mr. Carlton.

"From a feeling of pride, in the first instance, I believe: since then, her original reticence has kept her silent. But—can you not tell me something, Mr. Carlton? Did Clarice marry Tom West?"

"Lady Jane, I cannot tell you anything," he repeated, some annoyance in his tone. "Miss Beauchamp was the Wests' governess, she was not mine. All I can say is, that if she married Tom West, I never knew it. So far as I believe, Tom West went out to India a single man. When I came down here to settle, I lost sight of them all."

"But—surely you can tell me something?" Jane persisted, collecting her senses, which seemed bewildered. "Did you not attend my sister here, at Mrs. Jenkinson's? You were certainly summoned to do so."

"What grounds have you for thinking so? By whom was I summoned?"

Jane's tongue was again tied. She could not tell of the note she had just read.

"The best answer I can give you, Lady Jane, is but a repetition of what I have already said," he resumed, finding she did not speak. "I never attended any one at Mrs. Jenkinson's in my life: I never was summoned to do so."

"And you can tell me nothing?"

"I cannot indeed."

Jane rose from her chair, dissatisfied. "Will you pardon me for saying, Mr. Carlton, that I think you could say more if you would. I *must* find my sister, living or dead. A curious suspicion has been latterly upon me that that little boy at Tupper's cottage is her child," she continued in agitation. "I wish you could help me."

He shook his head, intimating that he could not, opened the door for Lady Jane, and bowed her out. Laura, waiting in Jane's room still, questioned her when she returned.

"Well?" said she.

"Mr. Carlton either does not know anything, or will not disclose it," said Jane. "I think it is the latter."

"Did he ever know Clarice?"

"As Miss Beauchamp; not as Clarice Chesney. I believe he spoke truth there. He seems to have a difficulty in believing still that she was our sister. He says he was never inside Mrs. Jenkinson's house in his life. Laura, I should have shown him the note: I could have questioned him to so much more purpose."

"Ah, but that would not do at any price," laughed Laura. "I found it out in one of his hiding-places."

"How can you laugh at this moment?" rebuked Jane. "I feel as if some terrible secret were on the point of discovery. You need not go away, Judith."

Laura opened her eyes. "What secret?"

"How can I tell? I wish I could tell. If it were all straight and fair, why should Mr. Carlton betray agitation, and refuse to answer? There is no doubt my questions did agitate him. A horrible doubt is growing upon me, Laura: whether those young Wests can have deceived Clarice into a marriage which would not, or did not, hold good—and Mr. Carlton was the confidant of their plans!"

"Do you suppose Mr. Carlton would sully himself by anything so cruel and disgraceful?" flashed Laura. "He has his faults; but he would not lend himself to anything of that sort."

"Men think a poor friendless governess legitimate game sometimes," spoke Jane in low tones. "And she was only known as Clarice Beauchamp. Rely upon it, Tom West worked ill to Clarice in some shape or other. I fear Mr. Carlton knew of it, and is trying to screen him. It was so shadowed forth in that dreadful dream: Mr. Carlton was mixed up with it throughout."

"What was that dream, Jane?—Tell me now," whispered Laura eagerly. For, however it might have pleased Laura in general to ridicule not only dreams themselves, but those who dreamt them, the night hour, the vague dread overshadowing Jane's spirit, were all too plainly exercising their influence over her now. Jane began at once; it was a significant fact that she showed no thought of objecting. Judith, not caring to be solitary at a dream-telling, drew near and stood behind the chair of Lady Jane.

"It was on Monday night, the thirteenth of March," began Lady Jane, with a shiver, "and quite the beginning of Lent, for Easter was late that year——"

"What has Easter to do with it?" interrupted Laura.

"Nothing. I had gone to bed that evening as soon as tea was over, not feeling well, and by half-past nine I was asleep. I thought that Clarice came to my bedside, dressed in her shroud, and stood looking at me. Understand me, Laura—I remembered in my dream that I had gone to bed ill; I seemed to know that I was lying in bed, and that I was sleeping. I dreamt that Clarice came, I say, and I dreamt that I awoke. Her attire did not appear to frighten me, but she did not speak. 'Why are you here?' I asked. 'To tell you that I am gone,' she answered, and she pointed to her face, which was that of the dead, and to the shroud. But I did not appear to associate her words with death (at least, I could not remember to have done so when I awoke), but that she had gone on a journey. 'Why did you go without telling us?' I asked her. 'He stopped it,' she answered, 'he was too quick for me.' 'Who?' I asked: and she turned her deathly face round and pointed to the door of the room. I cannot describe to you, Laura, the horror, the fear, that at that moment seemed to take possession of me. 'Come and see,' Clarice said, and glided towards the door. I seemed to rise from my bed, and follow her, without the power of resistance. She kept looking over her shoulder, with her dead face and her dead fixed eyes, and beckoned to me. But oh! the dread, the fear I seemed to experience at having to look beyond that door! It was a dread such as we can never feel in life. I thought Clarice went out before me,—went out in obedience to one who was compelling her to go, as she was compelling me. It seemed that I would have given my own life not to look, but I had no thought of resistance. There, standing outside, and waiting for her, was——"

"A—h!" shrieked Laura, her nerves strung beyond their tension by superstitious terror. "Look at Judith!"

Jane started at the interruption, and turned round. Judith's face was almost as deathly as the face in Jane's dream. She stammered forth an excuse.

"I am not ill, my ladies; but it frightens me to hear these strange dreams."

Lady Jane resumed.

"Standing outside, waiting for Clarice, was the person she seemed to have spoken of as preventing her from telling us, as being 'too quick for her.' It was Mr. Carlton. He was looking at her sternly, and pointing with his outstretched hand to some dark place in the distance. I remember no more. I awoke with the terror, the horror—such horror, I tell you, Laura, as we can never experience in life, except in a dream. And yet I was collected enough not to scream. Papa was just getting better from his attack of gout, and I dared not raise the house, and alarm him. I drew my head under the bedclothes, and I believe a full hour passed before I had courage

to take it out again. There I lay, shivering and shaking, bathed in perspiration."

"It was a singular dream," said Laura musingly. "But, Jane, it could have had no meaning."

"I argued so to myself. Clarice was at a distance, in London, as we supposed, and Mr. Carlton was at South Wennock; that very evening, as late as half-past seven, he had been at our house with papa. This dream of mine took place before ten, for I heard the clock strike after I awoke. I had not liked Mr. Carlton before; we do take likes and dislikes; but it is impossible to tell you how very much that dream set me against him. Unjustly, you will say; but we cannot help these things. He was ever after associated in my mind with terror, with dread; and I would rather have seen you marry any one else in the world. This night, for the first time, I begin to see that the dream had a meaning, for Clarice must have been at South Wennock. Her note was dated the tenth, the previous Friday."

"How absurd, Jane! What meaning?"

"I cannot conjecture; unless, as I say, those young Wests brought any ill to Clarice, and Mr. Carlton was privy to it."

Laura would not accept the suggestion; she ridiculed it in the highest degree. And when she at length went away to her room she left a mocking, laughing word of censure behind her at Jane for what she called her "folly."

"I shall go to Mrs. Jenkinson's in the morning," murmured Jane.

She spoke aloud, though the words were only uttered in commune with herself. Judith came forward, a little wash-leather bag in her hand.

"It will be of no use your going to Mrs. Jenkinson's—as I believe, my lady. Did your ladyship ever see this?"

She took a trinket from the bag and laid it in Lady Jane's hand. An elegant little locket, the back of blue enamel, the rim set round with pearls, with a short fine gold chain some six inches in length attached to it on either side. Lady Jane needed to cast but one glance at it.

"Oh, Judith!" she cried, "where did you get this? It belongs to Lady Clarice."

"It *did* belong to her," returned Judith in a low tone. "My lady, I can tell you what became of her, I think. But the tale is full of horror and distress; one that you will not like to hear."

"Tell it," murmured Lady Jane, "tell it, whatever it may be."

"That poor lady about whom so much has been said in South Wennock—who died the very night of your dream, my lady, not at Mrs. Jenkinson's, but at the Widow Gould's, next door to it—*she* gave me the locket."

Lady Jane stood with dilating eyes. She could not sufficiently collect her ideas to understand.

"I speak of Mrs. Crane, my lady, who died after taking the composing draught sent in by Mr. Stephen Grey."

"She could not have been my sister!" panted Lady Jane scarcely above her breath. "Judith, *she* could not have been my sister!"

"I truly believe she must have been so, my lady," whispered Judith. "She told me it was her own hair inside. And that letter, which Lady Laura brought in to-night, was the one read by the coroner at the inquest; that is, it was only partly read, for half of it was missing."

Jane sank upon her knees, unable to support herself in the shock of discovery. Just as she had sunk in another shock of discovery once before, that long-ago evening when her father had brought home his unwelcome bride.

CHAPTER XVIII.

CROSS-PURPOSES.

THE revelation disturbed Lady Jane's previous theory. Mrs. Crane? Then it appeared evident that Clarice had married the Mr. Crane spoken of by Mrs. West. But there were discrepancies still. How account for the assertion in that letter to her husband, that she had not taken her proper name, when she called herself Mrs. Crane?

What feeling induced Jane to withhold the news of this discovery from Laura? An instinct? What feeling caused her to give orders for quitting Mr. Carlton's house on the following morning?—hurrying away Lucy, almost at the risk of her health? Of the true facts of the case she was in complete uncertainty; but a dark suspicion kept floating within her that the man seen on the stairs by Mr. Carlton the night of the death was the husband, Mr. Crane. The poor lady had asserted that her husband was travelling; but, by the letter above alluded to, it was apparent that her husband was then in South Wennock. It was altogether incomprehensible. Judith wore a timid, downcast look when questioned by her mistress, as if fearing she should be asked too much.

"This is a sudden departure, Lady Jane," cried Mr. Carlton, as she went into his presence in the morning. "I thought you would have been here at least a few days longer. Mind! I do not guarantee that Lucy is fit to be moved."

"I take the risk upon myself, Mr. Carlton. I—I thank you sincerely for your hospitality, for your kindness and attention to Lucy, but I am anxious to be at home. I feel that I must be at

liberty; free to pursue this investigation of which I spoke to you last night, regarding the fate of my sister Clarice. Had you been more open with me, Mr. Carlton, I might not have gone so soon."

A shade of annoyance crossed his countenance. "It is a singular thing that you should persist in attributing to me a knowledge of these things, Lady Jane."

"My firm conviction is, that you do possess the knowledge," was Jane's answer. "But in speaking of Clarice last night, I may have somewhat misled you; I was misled myself. It was not at Mrs. Jenkinson's that she stayed when at South Wennock, but next door. That ill-fated lady who died at the Widow Gould's was my sister Clarice."

Mr. Carlton made no reply. He looked hard at Jane.

"She called herself Mrs. Crane. Of course I can only conclude that she married, not Tom West, but the Mr. Crane who used to visit at the Wests'. You must have known him well, Mr. Carlton. What sort of a man was he?"

"Sort of man?" repeated Mr. Carlton, who seemed half buried in his own thoughts. "He was a short man, stout, had black hair. At least, if my memory serves me well. I protest that I have never seen or heard of him, since the time he used to go to the Wests'. What have you learnt, Lady Jane, that can induce you to think that dead lady was your sister?"

"Short and stout, with black hair," repeated Jane, unmindful of the rest. "It must have been he: the same you saw on the stairs."

"That it was not," burst forth Mr. Carlton, unusually heated. "The face I saw on the stairs—if I did see one—bore no earthly resemblance to any one I had ever seen in my whole life."

"Did you know that Clarice—that Miss Beauchamp, married Mr. Crane?"

"I did not."

"I *cannot* divest myself of the idea that you know more of this past business than you disclose," she rejoined. "I want the clue to it. If you can furnish it, why will you not do so? You certainly were called in to Mrs. Crane: you gave evidence to that effect at the inquest."

"We are at cross-purposes, Lady Jane," was the surgeon's answer. "I can tell you nothing whatever. The lady I was called to attend in Palace Street was a stranger to me. As to the supposition you have taken up, that she was your sister, I think you must be wholly mistaken. But whether or not, my advice to you would be to let it drop. No good can result from it, investigate it as you will. The poor lady cannot be recalled to life, and it would not be pleasant for you or for my wife to have the matter raked up again and placed before the public. Let it drop, Lady Jane."

"I shall never let it drop," answered Jane. "And as to the unpleasantness—we must put up with that."

"As you please, of course," said Mr. Carlton with indifference. "I can say no more."

At cross-purposes they seemed indeed to be, and at cross-purposes they parted. Jane began to doubt whether she who died really was Miss Beauchamp, but she was resolute in her work of discovery, and as soon as Lucy was safely at home she went at once to Tupper's cottage. Judith told her that Mrs. Smith had confessed to her that the child was Mrs. Crane's.

Generally speaking, the door stood open: the sun, streaming in on a bright winter's day, was cheering: but it was shut now. Mrs. Smith opened it, and Jane said she wished for half-an-hour's interview with her, if she was at leisure.

"At too much leisure," was the woman's sad reply. "I am but watching the dead."

"The dead! He is not dead—that little child?"

"He is. He died between nine and ten this morning."

Jane sank into a chair in the kitchen. "And I never gave him a kiss for his mother's sake! I never knew that he belonged to her. Dead! He was—as I believe—my little nephew."

The woman stared at her. "*Your* nephew, madam! You are one of the Ladies Chesney."

"Yes—stay. This little child's mother died in Palace Street. Who was she? What was her married name?"

"I don't know. I would give a great deal to know."

Lady Jane felt sick at heart. Was it to be always thus? Was obstacle after obstacle ever to be thrust in her way?

"I pray you let us have no more concealment!" she said in a voice of anguish. "If I cannot come to the bottom of this business by fair entreaty, I must call in the help of the law. Did you never know that young lady's name before her marriage or after it?"

"I knew it before—at least the one she went by. I knew her first when she was governess at the Lortons'. She was Miss Beauchamp."

"And my dear sister!" exclaimed Jane, her doubts at rest. "Whom did she marry?"

Mrs. Smith held out her right hand. "I would give this to know."

"Let me see the child," said Jane.

He was lying on the bed upstairs in his white nightgown, a little cambric cap shading his wan white face. His hands were laid by his side, and a few geraniums were strewn on the sheet.

"He was so fond of flowers in life," said Mrs. Smith. "Geraniums especially. So was his mother."

Jane's tears fell upon the placid little countenance, and she

stooped and kissed it. "I did not do it while he lived," she said. "Why did you not tell me whose child he was then?"

"Nay, my lady, why did you not tell me who his mother was?—How was I to suspect she could be anything to the Ladies Chesney? I only knew her as a governess. Passers-by were always asking me about him in idle curiosity, just because they saw he was ill, and that we were strangers in the place. I thought you only asked from the same motive."

"You were attached to his mother," said Jane, as she gave a short history of her sister Clarice.

"I don't think I was ever so much attached to any one," was Mrs. Smith's answer; "though it was not for long I knew her."

"Then I ask you by that attachment to give me every particular you can respecting her."

"You might have heard all I know long ago, my lady, had I but been aware what you were to her. I knew her first at the Lortons' in Gloucester Terrace. I and Mrs. Lorton are cousins; yes, we are. She's a great lady, and lives in style, and tries to make herself out a greater; but she'll never be one, let her try ever so. We lived in a country town. Her father was a pastry-cook, and mine (they were brothers) kept a public-house. She thought the pastry line was more genteel than the public line, and held her head rather high. She married; married well—some London gentleman—and I stopped at home for many years, marrying nobody. In course of time my father and mother died, and all they had became mine. What with their savings and the sale of the business, I found I had about a hundred and fifty pounds a year. Then came my turn. George Smith, who had used our house for years, was sweet upon me, as the saying runs, and said why should we not join our means together: his salary, a hundred and fifty, and my hundred and fifty, would make three hundred, and we should be comfortable for life? I said nothing against it, but that I was getting on to be forty years of age and liked my own way. He, poor fellow, was turned forty by some years, and as mild as milk. So we married, and settled in London, where his master's house of business was, he being their country traveller. I couldn't set up for a lady, and I didn't; I was as plain and rough as ever. That didn't please Mrs. Lorton, and she shunned me. But when, soon after, Mrs. Lorton was taken with a dangerous illness, she was glad enough to send for me to nurse her through it. It was then I saw Miss Beauchamp. I thought her the sweetest girl I had ever met, and the more I saw of her the more I liked her. A real lady she was, there was no mistaking that. She had none of Mrs. Lorton's stuck-up airs, but spoke gently and kindly to folks, as if they were human beings. I was there for a month, for my husband

was away on his journey, and when I left, Miss Beauchamp promised faithfully to come and see me at Islington, where we lived. She did come, and she told me she had left Mrs. Lorton's, through that great big booby of a son making up to her, and had gone to Mrs. West's. After that, I saw no more of her for some months, until—I think it must have been September in the following year; and then she came, and asked if I could recommend her to a lodging. Of course I was surprised, and she told me she would confide a secret to me—that she was married. I asked why it was a secret. She laughed, and said for two reasons; one was, that her husband could not and would not tell his father, on account of some money matters between them that were not settled amicably; and the other reason was, that she, on her part, could not tell her family, for they were very high and proud, and would say she had disgraced them by her choice. Her husband, she said, was a professional man, and as soon as he got on well, so as to keep her in comfort and tolerable style, then they should declare it, and care for nobody."

"What did she say her name was?" interrupted Lady Jane.

"She did not say, madam. When I pressed her, she said it was better that it should not be known, especially as I was connected with the Gloucester Terrace Lortons; it might get to them, and it might get to the Wests, and that would not do. I said, then what was I to call her, and she laughed again, and said I might call her Miss Beauchamp; she was not afraid of my misconstruing her position. My lady, she never left my house again until she came down to South Wennock."

"Never left it!"

"I mean, not to live. Ours was a good house, and I said the drawing-room and bedroom level with it were at her service. But she *would* pay for them, and my servant waited on her. In December, my little child was born, the only one I ever had; and she, dear lady, used to sit with me, and be——"

"But did her husband never come to see her all that time?" interrupted Lady Jane with wonder.

"Never once to my house. From what I could gather—for she would let a word now and then drop in forgetfulness—he seemed to have left London for the country. He would occasionally come to London, and of that she made no secret, and at those times she would go out and be away for a day or two. But I never knew where she stayed."

"How were her letters addressed?" asked Jane. "She must have received letters."

"No letters came to the house; she used to go to Islington post-office for them. Once, when she was expecting one, she was too ill

to go out, and sent the maid. I saw the letter in the girl's hand as she came in; it was directed 'C. C.'"

"For Clarice Crane," thought Jane. Though it might have served equally for Clarice Chesney.

"Towards the next March she grew restless. She would be expecting her own illness in May, and she did not like to be ill so far from her husband. She said she would go down to where he lived, whether he was pleased or not. He said she was not to go—so she told me; and I spoke against it; I did not think she was strong enough to travel. I was in great grief at that time, for my child had died; and, as to my husband, I thought he'd never be pacified. When old folks like us get blessed with a child for the first time, they are as fond of it and proud of it as a dog with two tails. Ah, well!" added Mrs. Smith, in an indifferent tone, as she rubbed her nose, "it's all over, and I'm almost glad it didn't live, for the world's full of trouble and wickedness. Miss Beauchamp promised that I should nurse hers, and, my lady, I looked to that promise as a famished man looks to food, for I am naturally fond of children: and I didn't want her to go away, lest I should not get the baby, after all."

"But she went?"

"She went; there was no stopping her. She packed her things in one large trunk, burned all her letters and papers, and left on the morning of the tenth of March. I well remember the day; it was a Friday. The next day, the Saturday, I was out with some friends, country people who had come to London for a few days' pleasuring. They were at an inn near the Strand, and nothing would do but I must go and breakfast with them, which they had made me promise to do, and I went out early, before the post was in. When I got home at night there was a letter from Miss Beauchamp, asking me to go to her, for she was ill at South Wennock. I took the night train, and when I arrived I found the baby was born—the tiniest child I almost ever saw. I was very angry with her, my lady; I could not help it. And she had endangered her life for nothing, as may be said, for when she got to South Wennock, her husband was away."

"Away?" interrupted Lady Jane.

"So she said. And by a word she let drop, I thought he was a surgeon, but I was not sure. I took the baby away with me that same evening. I could not stop, for, as bad luck would have it, my husband was coming home on the Monday, ill. She told me to have the baby baptized, and to name him 'Lewis'—and it occurred to me that it might be the name of its father. I took the liberty of adding George to it, after my husband."

There was a long pause. "Did you know she went by the name of Crane?" asked Lady Jane.

"She told me in her letter to ask for her by that name. I inquired of her, after I reached South Wennock, whether it was her real name, and she laughed and said, no more real than Beauchamp, nor half so much so. It was a name that her husband and young Mr. West were very fond of calling her, partly because she had a peculiar way of arching her neck, partly to tease her. Some gentleman, named Crane, to whom she had an aversion, used to visit at the Wests'; and, to make her angry, they would call her by his name—Mrs. Crane. She said it had never struck her that she should want a name for South Wennock until she was close to the place, and then she thought of that one—Crane. It would do for her as well as any other, until she assumed her legal one, which she supposed she should now soon do. I found great fault: I said she ought to have assumed it and been with her husband before the child was born; and we had quite words about it. She defended him, and said it would have been so, but for the child's coming before its time. She charged me not to write to her, *not to communicate at all with her*, until she wrote to me. We had nearly a fight upon another point. She wanted me to say I would be paid for the child; I steadily refused it. It was a boon to me to have the child, and I was at ease as to my circumstances. My lady, I took away the child, and I never heard one word from her, good or bad, afterwards."

"Never at all?"

"Never at all. My husband was at home with a long illness, and afterwards removed to Paisley, where he had a good situation offered him. Some friends took our house at Islington, and there I left a letter, saying where we had gone, directing it 'Mrs. Crane, late Miss Beauchamp.' It was never applied for."

"And you never wrote to South Wennock?" cried Lady Jane.

"I never did. I own I was selfish. I was afraid of losing the child, and my husband had grown to love it as much as I did. I argued, if she wanted the child she would be sure to apply for it. Besides, I thought I might do some mischief by writing, and I did not know her real name or address."

"But what could you think of her silence?—of her leaving the child?"

"We thought it might arise from one of two reasons. Either that she had gone with her husband to America, or some distant colony (she had said something about it in the early days when she was first at my house), and that her letters to me from thence must have miscarried; or else that—you must pardon me for speaking it, my lady—that she was not married, and shrank from claiming the child. I did not believe it was so, but my husband used to think it might be."

Jane made no reply.

"Anyway, we were thankful to keep him. And when my husband died last spring, his thought in his last illness was more for the child than for me. I sold off then, and determined to come to South Wennock: partly to hear what I could of Mrs. Crane: partly to see if the child's native air would do him good; he had never been strong. I never shall forget the shock when I got here and heard how Mrs. Crane had died."

Poor Jane thought she should never forget the shock of the previous night, when told that Mrs. Crane was Clarice Chesney.

"What I can't make out is, that her husband has never been heard of," returned Mrs. Smith, breaking the silence which ensued. "I—I am trying to put two and two together, as the saying goes, but somehow I can't do it; I get baffled. There's a talk of a dark man having been seen on the stairs near her room that night; one would think he must have been the husband, stolen in there to work the ill."

"I don't know," shivered Lady Jane. "Since you have been speaking, other dark fears have come upon me. Fears which I dare not look at."

Yes: various fears, and thoughts, and remembrances were stirring within her. A recollection of that scrap of letter, found by Lady Laura in her drawer of fine laces soon after becoming Mr. Carlton's wife. Laura had always persisted that the paper must have come from Cedar Lodge with her clothes: how else, she argued, could it have got there? *Now* Jane began to think (what she would have thought before but for its apparent impossibility) that the paper must have been in the drawer before Laura ever went into the house; that it must have slipped under the paper covering of the drawer, and lain there, it was impossible to say how long. It had never occurred to her or to Laura to connect Mr. Carlton with it at all; and the little matter had puzzled Jane more than she cared to think of. Could the letter have been written to Mr. Crane? Surely it had not been written to Mr. Carlton! But how came it in the drawer? Had Mr. Crane ever visited Mr. Carlton at South Wennock? And, again, there was Clarice's denial that her name was Crane. *What had been Mr. Carlton's part in it all?* was the chief question that now agitated Jane's mind.

She stayed with Mrs. Smith, talking and talking, and it was growing dusk when she left the cottage to walk home. But as Lady Jane went down Blister Lane and turned into the Rise, she started nervously at every shadow in the hedge, just as Mr. Carlton had started at them some years before.

CHAPTER XIX.

JUDITH'S STORY.

In the twilight of the winter's evening, in the drawing-room of Lady Jane's house, Frederick Grey was sitting with Lucy Chesney. The removal from Mr. Carlton's that day did not appear to have harmed her; she seemed even stronger for it; and though Judith kept assuring her that she ought to go to her chamber and lie down, Lucy stayed where she was.

The interview was a sad one. It was Frederick Grey's farewell visit, for he was returning to London the following day. But the sadness did not arise from that cause, but from another. Lucy had been telling him something, and he grew hot and angry.

The fact was, Lady Jane, in her perplexity and tribulation at finding the deceased lady, Mrs. Crane, to have been Clarice Chesney, had that morning dropped a word in Lucy's hearing to the effect that the discovery might be the means of breaking off the contemplated marriage. Of course, Lucy was making herself very miserable, and her lover was very indignant.

"On what grounds?" he chafed, for he had rather a hot temper of his own. "On what grounds?"

"Jane thinks it will hardly be right that we should marry, if the mistake that brought Clarice her death was made by Sir Stephen. The mistake in the medicine, you know."

"Jane must be getting into her dotage," he angrily exclaimed. "Sir Stephen never did make the mistake. Lucy, my darling, be at rest: we cannot be parted now."

Lucy's tears were falling fast: she was weak from recent illness. To marry in opposition to Jane could never be thought of, and Jane was firm when she once took an idea into her head. In the midst of this, Jane came in from her visit to the little dead boy at Tupper's cottage, and Frederick Grey spoke out his mind, somewhat warmly. Judith, who entered the room to take her lady's bonnet, stood in surprise and concern: her sympathies were wholly with Frederick Grey and Lucy. He had not observed Judith enter.

"Oh, my lady," she exclaimed impulsively, "it would not be right to separate them. Ought the innocent to suffer for the guilty?"

"The guilty? the guilty?" mused Lady Jane. "How are we to know who is guilty?"

Judith stood, a strange expression of eagerness, blended with indecision, on her white face. She looked at Lady Jane, she looked at Frederick Grey; and she suddenly put down the bonnet she held, and turned to them.

"I will speak," she exclaimed. "I will declare what I know. Ever since last night I have been telling myself that I ought to do it. And I wish I had done it years ago!"

They looked at her in astonishment. What had come to quiet, sober Judith?

"My lady, you ask who was guilty—how it is to be known? I think I know who it was: I believe it was Mr. Carlton. I could almost have proved it at the time."

"Oh, Judith!" exclaimed Frederick Grey reproachfully, while Jane dropped her head upon her hand, and Lucy gazed around, wondering if they had all gone crazy. "And you have suffered my father to lie under suspicion all these years!"

"I did not dare to speak," was Judith's answer. "Who was I, a poor humble servant, that I should accuse a gentleman—a gentleman like Mr. Carlton, thought well of in the place? No one would have listened to me, sir. Besides, in spite of my doubts, I could not believe he was guilty. I thought I must have made some strange mistake. And I feared that the tables might be turned upon me, and *I* should be accused."

Whatever she knew, and however long she might have suppressed it, there was no resource but to speak out fully now. She took up her position against the wall, partly hidden from what little light the fire gave by the folds of the crimson curtains. Lucy sat forward on the sofa as one bewildered, Lady Jane's face was still shaded by her hand, Frederick Grey stood with his elbow on the mantel-piece.

"I will not be Mr. Carlton's accuser," she began. "No, my lady, I will simply tell what I saw, and let others judge. The impression of his guilt on my mind may have been altogether some great mistake. I—I suppose I must begin at the beginning?"

"You must begin at the beginning and go on to the end," interposed Frederick Grey authoritatively.

"And I'll do it," said Judith. "On the Sunday evening when that poor lady, Mrs. Crane, lay ill at the Widow Gould's, I stepped in between eight and nine to wish her good night. I had a bad faceache, and was in great pain, and I wanted to get to bed. The widow and Nurse Pepperfly were at supper in the kitchen; I saw them as I passed the kitchen window, and I ran upstairs quietly, without disturbing them. I had no light, and I found the bedroom in darkness, but it was a fine moonlight night. I spoke to Mrs. Crane, but she was asleep, and did not answer, and I sat down by the bed, behind the curtain, and nursed my face for a minute or two. There came a ring at the door-bell, and I heard Mrs. Gould answer it, and attend the visitor upstairs. I thought it might be Mr. Stephen Grey, but as they came into the adjoining sitting-room,

I heard Mrs. Gould address him as Mr. Carlton. She went down again, and he came into the chamber, without the light. His coming in awoke Mrs. Crane, for I heard her start and stir, and he approached the bed. 'Clarice,' said he, 'Clarice, how could you be so imprudent, so foolish, as to come to South Wennock?' 'Oh, Lewis, I am so thankful you have returned!' she answered in a joyful, loving tone, which struck me with amazement. 'Don't be angry with me; we can keep our secret; but I could not bear the thought of being ill so far away. It is such a sweet little boy!' 'It was exceedingly wrong, Clarice,' he went on in a vexed tone; but I heard no more, for I stole out of the room. I heard Mr. Carlton say 'Who's there?' but I sped downstairs quietly in my list shoes, for I did not like them to think they had been overheard. As I went by the kitchen, Mrs. Gould spoke to me, telling me, I remember, of an accident that had happened to Mr. Carlton that evening in coming from Great Wennock. I ran in home, and went to bed; but what with the pain in my face, and the words I had overheard next door, I could get no rest. It seemed a mystery to me, and nothing less, that the young lady should be so intimate with Mr. Carlton, when she had asked about him and spoken of him as a stranger. It came into my mind to wonder whether he could be her husband, but I thought I must be downright foolish to suppose such a thing. However, it was no business of mine, and I knew I could keep my own counsel."

"Go on, Judith," said Lady Jane, for Judith had paused in thought.

"The next day I was anything but well, for I had had no sleep, and the pain in my face worried me. In the afternoon it began to swell, and in the evening, when Mr. Stephen Grey came to see Mrs. Crane, he told me the swelling would make it easier, but that I ought to tie it up. It was just seven when Mr. Stephen came in, and he expected Mr. Carlton. He waited till a quarter past, but Mr. Carlton did not come. He observed that Mrs. Crane was flushed and looked feverish, and he spoke quite sharply to me and Mrs. Pepperfly, and said there had been too much gossiping going on. We replied that the lady would talk, feeling well, and we could not prevent her. He said he should send in a composing draught: and he left. I returned home to tie my face up, but at first I was puzzled what to tie it with, as my boxes were not at Mrs. Jenkinson's, and a pocket-handkerchief was hardly warm or large enough. I found an old piece of black plush, which had covered a bonnet I had worn all the winter, and had unpicked that day. It was not worth much, and I cut it in two, and doubled the pieces together, so that they formed two ears or lappets, fastened them to some black tape, and tied them up round my chin and the sides of my face. I had on a black cap, being in mourning for my

late mistress, and when I saw myself in the glass, I thought I did look a guy. What with my swollen face, which was glazed and white, and my black eyes, which seemed blacker than usual, and this flossy plush round my face, I was a sight to be seen! 'Goodness me!' exclaimed Margaret when I got downstairs, 'what have you been doing with yourself? One would think you had a pair of whiskers on?' And she wasn't far wrong, as appearance went, for the edge of the black quilled net-border close to my face, and the rough plush behind it, made a very good imitation of whiskers. I was dead tired; I felt as if I could sleep; and after sitting awhile with Margaret, I said I would go in and see if Mrs. Crane wanted anything more that I could do, and then come back and go to bed. As on the previous night, I saw that the nurse and Mrs. Gould were at supper in the kitchen—or, rather, sitting at the supper-table, for their supper seemed to be over. I went quietly upstairs; and, knowing those two were downstairs, I was surprised to hear a movement in the sitting-room. The first thought that struck me was, could Mrs. Crane have been so imprudent as to get out of bed for anything she might want, and I peeped in through the door, which was ajar. It was not Mrs. Crane; she was safe in bed, and the door between the two rooms was shut. It was Mr. Carlton. The light was on the mantel-piece, and he stood at the cheffonier. He had a very, very small bottle in his hand, putting a cork into it, and then he put it into his waistcoat pocket. Next he took up a larger bottle, the size of those which had contained night-draughts for Mrs. Crane; it had been standing close to his hand on the cheffonier, and the cork by it; he hastily put the cork into it, and put it on the little shelf of the cheffonier. He turned so quickly to leave the room, that I had not time to get out of the way. I did not know what he had been doing; I did not know it was anything wrong; but an instinct flashed across me that he would not like to find he had been watched; not that when I peeped in I had thought of doing anything mean or underhanded. I just drew up against the wall on the landing—the worst place I could have got to, for the moonlight came in upon my face—and he saw me. He could see nothing of me but my face; but he looked at me with a sort of frightened glare. My eyes, accustomed to the dark, could just discern his face: *he* had come from the lighted room. 'Who and what are you?' he whispered, but I thought my best plan was not to answer. I did not like to go forward and speak, so I kept still. He wheeled round, and went back to the sitting-room to bring out the light, which gave me the opportunity of slipping inside the closet. He——"

"Oh, Judith!" interrupted Lady Jane, "then the man's face on the stairs, about which so much has been said, was yours!"

"My own and no other's, my lady. I was afraid to explain so, lest I should be further questioned, and I let it pass. Mr. Carlton brought out the light, but of course he could not see me, and, after he had looked all about, he went downstairs. I heard him say something to Mrs. Gould about a man upstairs with black whiskers, and I laughed to myself at the joke. But I did not care that anyone should know I had played it, though it had been unintentionally done, and when Mr. Carlton was gone and the women were shut up in the kitchen again, I stole down and took off the black plush ears in the yard, and put them into my pocket. I then knocked at the window, as if I had just come in, which startled them both, and Mrs. Gould called me a fool, and asked why I could not come into the house quietly and decently. I said I had come in to wish Mrs. Crane good night, and I went on upstairs. Mrs. Crane laughed at my swollen face, saying it looked like a full moon; but I thought how much more she would have laughed had she seen it with the whiskers on."

Frederick Grey, who had stood with his eyes fixed on Judith, listening to every word, interrupted with a question.

"Did you not suspect, did it not occur to you to suspect, that the draught might have been tampered with?"

"Never, sir, for a moment. How was I likely to suspect such a thing? Was not Mr. Carlton a doctor, and in practice? I did not *know* that he had added anything to the draught; but if I had known it, I should only have supposed it to be some alteration that, as her attendant, he considered necessary to make."

"Well, go on."

"I left them, and went indoors to bed, and the next morning Margaret told me that Mrs. Crane had died: died the previous night before ten o'clock, through taking the sleeping draught sent her by Mr. Stephen Grey. I don't know how I felt. I could not tell you if I tried, or the dreadful doubt that came over me, whether or not Mr. Carlton had touched it. I heard of his having smelt poison in the draught when it first came, and I thought then of course the poison must have been in it; that when I saw him alone with the bottle open, he might only be smelling it again. Of one thing I felt certain—that Mr. Stephen Grey had not committed the error—and the state of mind, the uncertainty I was in until the inquest, no tongue could tell. I went to the inquest; I wanted to be at rest one way or the other, to gain some relief from my perplexity. Young Frederick Grey—I beg your pardon, Mr. Frederick; I had my thoughts cast back in the past—had whispered to me, that if any one mixed poison with the draught it was Mr. Carlton, not his father; and though I would not listen to him, his words made a deep impression on me. At the inquest I heard Mr. Carlton give

his evidence, and from that moment I believed him to have been guilty. He swore before the coroner that he neither touched nor saw the draught after he gave it back to Mrs. Pepperfly; that he did not observe or know where she placed it. That I knew to be a falsehood. He did see it and touch it, and took care to replace it in the position that the old woman had done. He testified that he had told Mrs. Crane not to take the draught, but I felt sure he had told her nothing of the sort. He swore also that he knew nothing of Mrs. Crane, who she was, or where she came from, and *that* I knew was false. An impulse came over me to step out before the coroner and declare all I had seen and heard, but somehow I did not dare do so. I feared he might turn round and set me at defiance by denying it, or even accuse me in his stead—and which of us would have been listened to?—an established medical man, such as he; or an obscure servant, such as myself? Part of a letter was found before the inquest was over—and, my lady, it was a faithful copy, for I remember every word, of the first part of that letter found last night by Lady Laura. The coroner showed it to Mr. Carlton, and he fenced in his answers. He took the letter to the window, and stood there with his back to the room; the jury thought nothing, but I was sure it was only to collect himself, and gain time to cover his agitation. That letter, which Lady Laura found, was the one written by Mrs. Crane the night of her arrival, for I recognized the envelope again last night: the very letter which Mrs. Gould got me to carry to Mr. Carlton's. As I came out of the inquest-room, I felt quite sure that he had murdered the lady."

"You ought to have declared all this, Judith."

"My lady, I say that people would not have believed me. There was not a jot of evidence to corroborate my tale, there was no proof at all that he knew her. If declared to them now, they will not, perhaps, believe it."

"It might have saved my sister Laura," murmured Lady Jane.

"I did what little I could to keep her from Mr. Carlton. After I went to live with you, my lady, Pompey let slip a word that Miss Laura—as she was then—used to go into the garden in secret, at the dusk hour, to meet Mr. Carlton. I could not say anything to Mr. Carlton openly: but I thought I might frighten him, and warn Miss Laura. One night when they were there (it was the very night before they went away) I took off my white cap and put on a black one, tied on those plush whiskers, which I have kept by me to this day, put a cap of Pompey's on my head, and threw on my master's old cloak. When I got to their meeting-place in the garden Miss Laura was alone; he had gone. It was nearly dark amidst the trees, where I stood. She could get but an imperfect view of me, and I disguised my voice, and warned her, in the best way I knew how,

against Mr. Carlton. Mr. Carlton saw me as I was stealing back again, and I raised the cap and he saw my face in the moonlight. He looked frightened to death. I suppose he recognized it again for the same face he had seen on the landing that night, and I glided amidst the trees until he had gone. I have appeared to him in the same way once or twice since then. You may remember, my lady, the night we returned home after my lord's death. When we had left Lady Laura and gone on, you discovered that her dressing-case had been forgotten in the fly. I got out to take it to her, saying I would walk home afterwards. I left it at the servants' entrance, and in passing the dining-room window, coming away, I saw Mr. Carlton by the light of the fire. I pushed back my bonnet, snatched my black scarf off my neck, tied it down the sides of my face under the chin, and pressed my face flat against the panes, which naturally made it look wide. He saw it was the same figure which had so terrified him before, and I heard his cry of amazement, as I rushed away, putting my bonnet on as I went."

"How do you account for it, Judith—that your appearance should inspire him with this terror?" interrupted Frederick Grey.

"Sir, in this way. I think that when he first saw me, that night on the staircase, he must have feared it was somebody who had watched him insert the poison; but when no one could be traced or heard of, as having been in the house, then he doubted whether the appearance might not have been supernatural. I fancy there has been a conflict in his mind all along, sometimes giving way to the fancy that the figure was real, sometimes that it was not; and equally fearing both."

Frederick Grey nodded, and Judith continued.

"The years wore on, but somehow I always felt a fear of Mr. Carlton. The feeling that was upon me was—that no one was safe with him. I dare say it was a foolish feeling, but I could not help it. When Lady Lucy was taken ill with the fever, and Mr. Carlton kept her at his house in what might be called an underhanded manner, I grew quite alarmed, wondering whether he intended any ill to her, and the night the lamp went out in the hall I whispered words to him that he did not like. I did it in my fear. And only a night or two ago I put on those plush whiskers again—for I determined to do it, and fetched them from Cedar Lodge—and made myself look altogether as much what I looked like that first night as I could, and stood in the dusk at the surgery window."

"But it is strange that he never recognized you!" interrupted Frederick Grey.

"Not strange, sir. You cannot think how those plush sides and the black border disguise my face. It looks exactly like a man's. Besides, Mr. Carlton has never seen it except in the most imperfect

and uncertain light. I think he must have been struck with some faint resemblance, for Lady Laura told me laughingly the other day that there was a look in my face Mr. Carlton could not bear. And all this time, my ladies, I never had the remotest suspicion that the lady who died in Palace Street was connected with the family I serve."

Judith ceased. The tale was told. And she stood motionless within the shadow of the crimson curtain in the silence that fell upon the room.

CHAPTER XX.

THE LAWYER'S TELEGRAM.

COULD there be any doubt of the guilt of Mr. Carlton? It was scarcely to be hoped for. Jane Chesney and Frederick Grey remained alone after Judith's revelation, pondering the question in their own minds, scarcely liking to look in each other's faces. Judith had left the room; Lucy was upstairs, going to rest—if rest she might hope for. Poor Lucy thought she should never leave off shivering. She was younger than they were, more inexperienced in the ways of the world, and utterly unprepared for the disclosure. Never a doubt had crossed her of Mr. Carlton; she could scarcely believe that she must doubt him now; but she felt sick and faint.

Frederick Grey was the first to break the silence. "Do you remember, Lady Jane, a meeting between me and Mr. Carlton on the Rise, to which you were an accidental listener?" he inquired in low tones. "Do you remember the purport of the words I said to him?"

She made an affirmative gesture. "I have often recalled it, and the accusation you made against him."

"It agrees with this."

There was another long pause.

"He must have been her husband," resumed Jane, scarcely above a whisper.

"There's no doubt of it. Had she not been his wife, the necessity for putting her out of his way could not have arisen. We must suppose that it was done to enable him to—to—marry another."

The words were spoken hesitatingly in his delicacy of feeling, remembering who that other wife was. Jane moaned aloud; she could not help herself.

"*How* can Judith have kept that dreadful secret within her all these years?" was her next exclamation.

He took his elbow from the mantelpiece, where he had been

standing so long, came forward, and sat down opposite to Jane. "I have been thinking it over, Lady Jane, and I really do not see—looking back—that Judith could have done otherwise. I confess that my first impression was a selfish one; a certain resentful feeling that she should not have declared what she knew, and so have cleared my father. Now that I reflect upon it dispassionately, I do not think she could have done it. As she observes, none might have believed her. Think what a strange charge it would have been to bring against a medical man!"

"But if she had disclosed the few words of conversation she heard pass between Mr. Carlton and Clarice at their first greeting? *That* surely would have established previous relations between them, and have been a clue to the rest."

He shook his head. "Yes, had Judith been believed. It would all have lain in that. I think the chances are she would not have been; and Mr. Carlton would have crushed her and triumphed."

"What is to be done now?" wailed Jane.

"Nothing. You would not like to proceed against Mr. Carlton, or bring any public accusation against him. Circumstances forbid it."

"Bring a public accusation against Mr. Carlton!" repeated Jane, recoiling in horror from the thought. "And Laura his wife! No, no; I did not allude to that, I did not think of it. Clarice and Laura were both alike my sisters; and the one, dead, must remain unavenged for the sake of the one, living. I spoke of Laura herself. What is to be done about her? She cannot be suffered to remain with Mr. Carlton."

Frederick Grey drew in his lips. It was too delicate a point for him, and he preferred not to discuss it. "I cannot meddle with that, Lady Jane. She has been with him ever since, all these years."

True. Jane saw not her way clearly. "How could Mr. Carlton be so bold and imprudent as to keep that letter?" she said aloud, alluding to the letter found by her sister, and which she had been describing to Frederick Grey.

"Ah, that's inexplicable," was his quick reply. "At least it would be, but that we every day see guilty men commit the most unaccountable mistakes: mistakes that the world can only marvel at. It may be, that some fatal blindness overtakes their minds and judgments, causing them to bring upon themselves their own doom. There is a Latin proverb, Lady Jane: '*Quod Deus vult perdere, prius dementat.*'"

But the reader—if he possesses any memory—can explain the fact, in this instance, better than Frederick Grey. Whatever mistakes Mr. Carlton committed in that unhappy business as against his own safety, this was not one of them, for the retention of the letter was an accident. Do you remember that he searched for the

letter and could not find it, and came to the conclusion that he had burnt it with some others, notes and trifles that were of no consequence? He put one letter away in his iron safe, supposing it to be a note from his father that he wished to preserve; the real fact being that *this* was the letter he put up, the one from his father he burnt. All in mistake. A chance error, people might have said; but how many of these trifling "chances" may be traced in the chain, leading to the discovery of some great crime. It happened that Mr. Carlton never had occasion to look at his father's (supposed) letter again, and there it lay forgotten, waiting to fulfil its mission, until it was at length unearthed by the jealous hands of Mr. Carlton's wife. Had he not tried that wife, had he been always loyal to her, the past crime might never have been brought home to him during life.

For it was that letter that finally led to the discovery. It was the turning-point that drove home the guilt where it was due. And yet it may be said that the chain leading to it was linked by accident, more than by design.

Lady Jane, painfully perplexed, had brought away the letter when she quitted Mr. Carlton's house that morning. She had it in her pocket at Mrs. Smith's, and after the explanation had taken place, Jane showed her the letter, in the hope that it might in some way help to identify the husband, to whom it was evidently written. Even then Jane had no suspicion of Mr. Carlton, or if she had, it was only in a very vague degree. She believed that Clarice had married Mr. Crane, and that however Mr. Carlton might have been mixed up in the affair, it had been only as Mr. Crane's friend and associate. Jane would have shown the letter to Frederick Grey, but it was not just now in her possession. She described it, and he took up the clue at once.

"Ah, yes, it was to her husband she wrote it; Mr. Carlton. But the playful style in which, as you describe, it is written, would mislead any one who has not the key. They would never suppose that the husband spoken of, and the medical man she says she must ask to come to her, were one and the same. I should like my father to see that letter, Lady Jane."

"Oh yes, he shall see it. You—you are sure Sir Stephen would not use it against him?" she added quickly.

"Against Mr. Carlton? Oh no. I don't think he would do it in any case, certainly not in this. My father is the kindest man breathing. Lucy will be his daughter-in-law; and Mr. Carlton is her sister's husband. Sir Stephen must lie under suspicion still, for Lucy's sake—perhaps I ought rather to say for Lady Laura's sake. It has not injured him, Lady Jane; he lived down the odium long ago: witness how he was received the other day at South Wennock."

But if Frederick Grey and Lady Jane agreed that the affair altogether, including the letter, must be suppressed, there was another individual who, unfortunately, took just the opposite view of it. This was Mrs. Smith. And at this very moment, while they were so speaking, she was making the first move to publish it abroad.

Chance links, fitting one into the other! chance events, words, trifles in the chain of discovery! From the hour in which Mrs. Smith had found Mr. Carlton searching her drawers, she had had a suspicion of him; *not* that he was the husband of Mrs. Crane, but that he held some secret connected with that past time. The little boy, Lewis, had told her he heard Mr. Carlton looking into drawers upstairs as well as down, and the woman wondered excessively. Like most secretive persons, she dwelt much upon it in her own mind; and when the time came—as it did come—that a little fresh evidence bearing on the past met her ears, a half-doubt crept into her mind of the worst, as connected with Mr. Carlton.

You may rememember Mrs. Smith's afternoon levee. You may remember that Judith as she left the cottage met Mr. Carlton driving up to it; and you may also remember a casual remark to the effect that Mr. Carlton returned home from that visit a little put out with some trifle that had occurred there. Very greatly to his annoyance, the Widow Gould—whom he had not the honour of meeting frequently in private society—brought up the subject of Mrs. Crane. Her tongue was never at rest, and she had not the least tact. She alluded openly to the fact of Mrs. Smith being the person who took away the child, and persisted in speaking of the past in a manner not at all agreeable to the surgeon. Mrs. Pepperfly (also a visitor) thought there was no harm in chiming in, now that it was openly commented upon, and the two kept up a duet as long as they had the chance, which was as long as Mr. Carlton was attending to the child, then on Mrs. Smith's lap in the kitchen. Mrs. Gould's concluding remark put the finishing touch to the gossip.

"I could have declared that you was known to her, Mr. Carlton, sir, the very day she first come to South Wennock. It was in this way: Mrs. Crane——"

The surgeon turned round, a sort of glare in his eyes. If looks could enforce silence, the Widow Gould had been silenced then. But in her want of tact she did not understand.

"Mrs. Crane asks who were the doctors here, and I told her the Mr. Greys and Mr. Carlton. Then she writes a note to Mr. Carlton, telling me to send it—as have been known to South Wennock many a day, for I told it out at the inquest. But when I had took the note downstairs, I saw it had your Chrissen name outside it, sir, Lewis. Many a time have I wondered how she got at the name.

Judy said Mrs. Fitch might have told it, but Mrs. Fitch said she didn't, and——"

"Is it well to have this gossip in the room when your child's so ill?" sternly asked the surgeon of Mrs. Smith. "It is bad for him; and it must not be allowed. You might choose a better time, I think, for receiving visitors."

The words, the tone, took Mrs. Gould by surprise. She sat a moment with her mouth open, and then seemed to shrink into nothing, too completely checked to offer even a whisper of apology. Mr. Carlton gave a short direction in regard to the child, strode out to his carriage, and was driven away.

"How did I offend him?" breathed the Widow Gould then, questioning the other two with her eyes.

"I wish you'd go on with what you were saying about the Christian name," returned Mrs. Smith. "I never heard this before."

"It's not much to go on with. When I saw the name, Lewis Carlton, Esq., on the letter, I wondered how she knew it was Lewis, and I've wondered since. Judy said his name must have been in the newspaper I had took up to her to read while she had her tea, but I looked in it after she was dead, and I couldn't see it. I saw his name, 'Mr. Carlton,' but I couldn't see 'Lewis.'"

"*Is* Mr. Carlton's name Lewis?" asked Mrs. Smith.

The Widow Gould opened her eyes at the question. "I thought all South Wennock knew that."

Perhaps all South Wennock did know it; nevertheless Mrs. Smith did not. It was a singular fact that Mrs. Smith until that hour had remained ignorant of Mr. Carlton's Christian name. She might possibly have heard it before, but if so it had escaped her notice. The plate on his door was no longer "Mr. Lewis Carlton;" it had been changed to "Mr. Carlton" upon his father's death.

This little incident, the revelation of the name, and Mr. Carlton's uncalled-for anger, had made a great impression on Mrs. Smith. She had always surmised that Lewis must have been the Christian name of Mrs. Crane's husband, and her doubts of Mr. Carlton were certainly aroused. She had said to Lady Jane this very morning that she was trying to "put two and two together," and could not do it. In plain English, had she only spoken out, she would have said she suspected Mr. Carlton, but wanted some clue to turn doubts into facts. *After* she had made this remark, Lady Jane showed her the letter, and she thought Mrs. Smith would never have done looking at it. *When* she returned it, it was in silence, without comment.

"Would you mind leaving this note with me for an hour or two, my lady?" she then asked. "I should like to think it over when I am alone."

Lady Jane saw no reason why she should not leave the note. She still thought it had been written to Mr. Crane. And after her departure from the cottage, Mrs. Smith sat down, note in hand, and deliberated. Not upon whether Mr. Carlton was guilty or not—the letter, which *she* read correctly, had completely settled that doubt in her own mind—but upon the manner in which she could best bring it home to him. Never for a moment had Mrs. Smith wavered in her intention of bringing Clarice Beauchamp's destroyer to justice if she succeeded in discovering him, and that she knew she had done now. Lady Jane Chesney in her own home felt not more sure of Mr. Carlton's guilt, now she had heard Judith's story, than did Mrs. Smith in her home at Tupper's cottage, *not* having heard it.

"What had I better do?" she communed with herself. "See a magistrate at once, and tell my story; or see a lawyer, and get him to act? I have not been much in the way of these things, thank Heaven, and I hardly know the right manner to set about it. But I'll do one of the two this blessed night."

When the mind is in this excited, determined state, action is almost imperative, and Mrs. Smith put on her bonnet to go out. But she found her plans frustrated. The young woman-servant, who had been away all the afternoon, and only returned to the cottage when Lady Jane was leaving it, positively declined to be left alone in the house with the little dead boy.

"You great simpleton!" exclaimed Mrs. Smith in her indignation. "You are old enough to know better. What do you suppose that dead baby would do to you?"

The girl could not say what; she had no very defined idea upon the subject; but she wholly refused to remain alone. If Mrs. Smith went out, she'd go out too; she wouldn't dare to stop.

The difficulty was solved by an arrival; that of Mrs. Pepperfly. Never had the old woman been so welcome to Mrs. Smith, and she consented to stay the evening. In point of fact, it was just the intention she had come with.

"Who are the magistrates here?" asked Mrs. Smith.

"Magistrates?" repeated Mrs. Pepperfly, looking astonished.

"Are there any living about here? I wanted to see one."

Mrs. Pepperfly could not get over her surprise. Magistrates and their places of domicile were not much in her line, and she really could give no information. "If it's to register the boy's death, it ain't a magistrate you must go to," she said. "And you'll want a certificate from Mr. Carlton. Them register men won't do nothing without one."

"It's not to register the death; that's done; it's for something else—a little private matter of my own. Perhaps you can recom-

mend me to a clever lawyer?—He might do for me better than a magistrate."

"The cleverest lawyer I know is Mr. Drone, two doors from the Red Lion," returned Mrs. Pepperfly. "He haven't his equal in the place. Let anybody in a bit o' trouble go to him, and he's safe to pull 'em through it. He's what they call the justices' clerk."

Accepting the recommendation, Mrs. Smith set forth on her night walk. She passed down the Rise, and through the town as far as the Red Lion. Just beyond, on the door of a private house, she read, "Mr. Drone, Solicitor;" rang the bell, and asked to see him.

Mr. Drone anything but exemplified his name. He was a little man, particularly brisk and active, and came to Mrs. Smith with a red face. He had finished his dinner, and had since been toasting himself over the fire, for it was a very cold night.

The fire in the inner office, a small square room, where Mrs. Smith had been shown, was nearly out, but the lawyer cracked it up, and put on some more coal. They sat down, the table, covered with the lawyer's papers, between them, and Mrs. Smith told her tale from beginning to end, the little lawyer, in his eagerness, perpetually interrupting her with questions.

The story astonished him beyond expression. Again and again he asked whether there could be any mistake. Mr. Carlton, who stood so well in the good graces of his fellow-townsmen, the destroyer of that poor Mrs. Crane! And Mrs. Crane his wife, and the sister of the Ladies Chesney? Mr. Drone thought he had never heard so improbable a tale in his whole life.

Mrs. Smith, calm, patient, persistent, went over it again. She spoke of Lady Jane's visit to her that afternoon, she handed him the letter her ladyship had left with her. Mr. Drone began to think there must be something in the story, and he set himself to recall as many particulars as he could of Mrs. Crane's death. He had been fully cognizant of them at the time.

"Does Lady Jane Chesney suspect Mr. Carlton?" he asked.

"Not she," replied Mrs. Smith. "She has no idea it was Mr. Carlton who was Mrs. Crane's husband. She suspects it was a Mr. Crane who married her, but she thinks Mr. Carlton knew of the marriage, for he was a friend of Mr. Crane's. I'm not sure, but she fears Mr. Carlton knew more about the death than he would like to say; only, however, as Mr. Crane's friend."

"But I can't see why Mr. Carlton should have destroyed this poor young lady—allowing that he did so, as you suspect," urged Mr. Drone.

"Nor I," said Mrs. Smith. "Unless any of his plans were put out by her coming down, and he was afraid it would be found out that she was his wife."

The lawyer pulled at his whiskers, his habit when in thought. "You see there's no certainty that she was his wife—that she was married at all, in fact."

"Then there is, for I'd stake my life upon it," angrily returned Mrs. Smith. "I'm as certain she was married as that I was married myself. You are as bad as my husband, sir; *he* used to say as much."

"The chief thing would be to get proof of it," composedly returned the lawyer. "It would supply a motive, you see. I suppose you never obtained the slightest clue as to where the ceremony took place?"

"N—o," returned Mrs. Smith hesitatingly. "I remember once, the winter that she was at my house at Islington, we were talking about churches and marriages and such things, and she said, in a laughing sort of way, that Old St. Pancras Church was as good a one to be married in as any. It did not strike me at the time that she meant anything by the remark; but it's just possible, sir, she was married there."

Mr. Drone's brisk eyes twinkled, and he made a memorandum in his pocket-book. He made other memorandums; he asked about five hundred questions more than he had already asked. And when Mrs. Smith departed, he stood at the door to watch her away, and then jumped into the omnibus just starting for Great Wennock station, and sent the following telegram to London:—

"Henry Drone, South Wennock, to John Friar, Bedford Row.

"Search Old St. Pancras register for 1847. Certificate of marriage wanted: Lewis Carlton to Clarice Beauchamp, or perhaps Clarice Chesney. Lose no time. Bribe clerk if necessary, and send special messenger down at once with it, if obtained."

CHAPTER XXI.

AN INTERRUPTED LUNCHEON.

MRS. SMITH of Tupper's cottage, and Mr. Henry Drone, solicitor and clerk to the magistrates at South Wennock, were holding a hot argument, almost a fight. With the dawn of the winter's morning, Mrs. Smith had presented herself at that gentleman's office, demanding, and obstinately persisting in the demand, that the case should be laid before the magistrates as soon as they met, and a warrant asked for to apprehend Mr. Carlton. Mr. Drone dissented: he saw no reason for being so precipitate.

"Look here," said he, "if you let this affair get wind before it's ripe, you may defeat your own ends. I am not sure that the

magistrates would grant a warrant as the case stands. It's a ticklish thing, mind you, to arrest a gentleman of hitherto good repute. Once the case is taken before the court, it will be blazoned from one end of South Wennock to the other, and Mr. Carlton—if he felt so inclined—might find escape easy."

"That's just what I want to prevent," retorted Mrs. Smith. "If the warrant is granted at once, he can't escape."

"But we cannot make sure that they will grant a warrant. I don't know that I would myself, were I one of the bench. I declare I couldn't sleep last night for thinking of the story, it is so strange a one. Doubt after doubt arose in my mind; and I came to the conclusion, times and again, that there must be some great mistake, and it could not be true."

"And you don't mean to go on with it!" resentfully spoke Mrs. Smith. "I would not have told you all I have, if I had thought that."

"Softly, ma'am," returned the lawyer; "I have said nothing of the sort. I do mean to go on with it. That is, I'll lay the case before their worships, and they can do as they please in the matter. What I urge is, don't strike before the iron's hot. When the subject of accusation is a man like Mr. Carlton, enjoying the confidence of the town, the husband of a peer's daughter, the bench won't grant a warrant lightly; they must have something beyond mere suspicion to go upon."

"And is there nothing here beyond mere suspicion?" asked Mrs. Smith.

"As you put it—yes. And perhaps the magistrates may consider so. But I say we should be at a great deal more certainty if we could get the copy of the marriage certificate. I tell you I have telegraphed for it: that is, I have telegraphed that the register at Old St. Pancras Church shall be searched. If it's found, that copy will be down here in the course of the morning."

"And if it's not found, sir?" rejoined Mrs. Smith in a blaze of anger. "It's quite a wild-goose sort of chase to search for it at all, in my opinion. She might just as well have been married at any other church in London as at that. The remark she made might have meant nothing. If it meant anything, I should have seen and suspected it at the time."

"I think it likely that it did mean something. We lawyers, ma'am, are apt to suspect these remarks. At any rate, we sometimes think it worth while to find out if they have a meaning or not."

"Then I'm thankful that I am not a lawyer," was the retort.

Mr. Drone shrugged his shoulders. "It's as pleasant a life as any, for what I see. All callings have their drawbacks. But what I wished to point out to you was this: that if that certificate comes down and we can produce it to the magistrates, they will have no

loophole of excuse; they *must* grant the warrant of apprehension. And as I expect the certificate (if it is in existence) down this morning, the application had better wait an hour or two."

"Then, sir, I tell you that I'll not wait the hour or two. No, nor a minute. As soon as the court doors are open and the magistrates are on the bench, the application shall be made. And if you don't like to appear and make it, I'll do it myself in person."

It was somewhat strange that Mrs. Smith, with her phlegmatic temperament, should put herself into this fever of determined haste. Did she fear that Mr. Carlton would suspect anything, and slip away? It may be, that she was vexed with herself for not having suspected him before, all the months that he had been visiting almost daily, at her house. One thing was certain: so convinced was she that the past guilt was Mr. Carlton's alone, and so incensed was her feeling against him in consequence, that if she could have conveniently appended the surgeon with one of her silk pocket-handkerchiefs to a beam in her cottage roof, she had hastened to do it, and not waited for the delay and intricacies of the law.

Mr. Drone could make nothing of her. Once set upon a thing, perhaps no woman living was more persistently obstinate in having her own way than Mrs. Smith—and that's saying a great deal, you know. The lawyer was not the first man who has had to yield, against his better judgment, to a woman's will; and at eleven o'clock, for the magistrates met late that day, he accompanied her to the court, and requested a private hearing. Their worships granted it, and proceeded to business with closed doors.

Meanwhile Mr. Carlton was going his morning rounds, and chatting amicably with his patients, in complete ignorance of the web that others were tightening round him, utterly unconscious that even then a plot built up by his enemies had begun to work. Oh, if some pitying spirit would but warn us of our peril, in these hours of danger!

No friendly spirit warned Mr. Carlton. He paid his visits, driving from one house to another, and returned home rather earlier than usual. The sickness was abating in South Wennock as quickly as it had come on, and the medical men were, comparatively speaking, at leisure again. Mr. Carlton went into the surgery, looked in the visiting book, dotted down a few orders for medicines for Mr. Jefferson to make up when he came in, and at one o'clock went into the dining-room.

Lady Laura was there. It was the first day she had come downstairs; that is, come regularly to meals. She was just about to sit down to luncheon, and so very unusual a thing was it for her husband to come in and join in that meal, that she looked at him in surprise.

"Ah, Laura! Down to luncheon again! I am glad of it, my dear."

He spoke in a cheery, hearty, loving tone; very, very rarely did he speak in any other to his wife. The time was to come when Laura would remember those tones with remorse, and think how she had requited them.

"You are home early to-day," observed Laura, quitting the chair she had been about to take, and drawing nearer the fire while she talked.

"Earlier than I have been lately. Laura, I shall advertise the practice at once now."

"Advertise the practice!"

"I am beginning to dislike this incessant work. And if I don't make an effort some time we shall never get away. How early you went to bed last night!" continued Mr. Carlton, passing to a different topic.

"I was tired," said Laura evasively. In point of fact, she had *not* been tired the previous evening, but angry at Jane's unexplained departure, and had gone to rest early.

"You are letting luncheon get cold."

Laura gave a side glance at the table and slightly tossed her head. She threw her eyes full at her husband, as he stood opposite to her in the light of the front and side windows.

"So that child's dead, I hear?"

"What child?" repeated Mr. Carlton, really not for the moment comprehending, for he was thinking of other things.

"As if you did not know! The child at Tupper's cottage."

"Oh yes; he died yesterday morning, poor little sufferer! The mother takes it dreadfully," he added, after a pause.

"Will you affirm to me, now that he is lying dead, that the child was nothing to you? You know what I mean."

"No," returned Mr. Carlton, with provoking coolness. "I answered you once on the point, and I thought you were satisfied. If you have been bringing up the old fancies again, Laura, you must abide by it; I shall not allow them to trouble me."

Thought she was satisfied! Little did Mr. Carlton suspect how far from "satisfied" she had been!—what a sea of jealousy her mind had become since! Laura resumed.

"The mother bears it badly, does she?"

"She did yesterday morning. I was up there half-an-hour after the child's death, and I think I never saw grief so passionate as hers was for the moment. I was astonished. But when these cold, stern natures yield to emotion, it is often strong. I dare say it spent itself long before the day was over."

"I suppose you soothed it for her?"

Mr. Carlton looked quickly at his wife: *was* she bringing up this absurdity again? "Laura!"

"Well?"

"What do you mean?"

Lady Laura's pouting lips and flushed cheeks answered for her, and Mr. Carlton had no need to ask a second time. But the absurdity of the thing, as connected with Mrs. Smith, struck so ludicrously upon Mr. Carlton, that his whole face relaxed into an amused smile.

"Oh, Laura? That hard old woman!"

Had he protested for an hour, it could not have opened her eyes to the real absurdity of her doubts more than did those simple words. She looked shyly up at him, her lip quivering. Mr. Carlton laid his hand fondly on her shoulder.

"Need I affirm it to you again, Laura?—that I never had any acquaintance with the woman, on my sacred word of honour? You cannot surely think it necessary that I should repeat it. What delusion can you have been giving way to?"

In truth, Laura hardly knew; except that it was one that had blinded her judgment and made her miserable. A conviction flashed into her mind that she had been altogether mistaken. And the chief sensation struggling through all the rest was one of shame, mingled with repentance, for having in this instance unjustly wronged him; for having betrayed her jealousy to the world, comprising Lady Jane and Judith; for having secretly visited Mr. Carlton's hiding-places.

She raised her hand, took his from her shoulder, and left her own within it, the tears trembling on her eyelashes. Mr. Carlton bent his face to hers.

"We will soon begin a new life elsewhere, Laura," he whispered. "It shall not be my fault if clouds come between us then."

Laura dried her eyes and turned to the luncheon-table. Two or three tempting little dishes were laid there. Lady Laura liked good living just as much as the earl had liked it. It was her pleasure not to be waited upon at luncheon, and she took up two of the plates, now nearly cold, and held them to the fire. Mr. Carlton took them from her to hold them there himself.

"You'll take luncheon with me to-day, Lewis?"

"It must be very little," said he, sitting down. "I always make a good breakfast. What's this? Stewed oysters. I'll try one or two of these. Shall I give you some?"

Laura chose to take some. He had just helped her, and was about to put some on to his own plate, when the door opened and Jonathan's head came in. It was rather an unusual way for a footman to enter a room, and they both gazed at him. The man looked pale; as one scared.

"What is it, Jonathan?" asked his master.

"You are wanted, if you please, sir."

"In the surgery? I'll come in a minute."

"No, sir; now, please," stammered Jonathan, looking more frightened with every passing moment.

Mr. Carlton, struck by the servant's manner, rose hastily. The thought that crossed him was, that some accident had been brought to the house. In the hall stood two policemen. Jonathan closed the dining-room door after his master.

Another minute and it was opened again. Lady Laura, curious to know what the wonder was, had come to see. The matter-of-fact officers with their impassive faces had closed round Mr. Carlton, one of them showing what looked like a piece of paper, as he spoke in an undertone; and the servant Jonathan stood apart, with open mouth and staring eyes. The moment Mr. Carlton perceived Lady Laura, he drew the policemen into the opposite room, and closed the door.

"Jonathan, what's all that?"

"Goodness knows, my lady," replied Jonathan, who still looked white and frightened.

"What do those policemen want? You are looking frightened. What did they say? What did you hear?"

"I wish you wouldn't ask me, please," hesitated the man, in his simple good-nature. "It would not do you good to hear it, my lady."

"How dare you refuse, Jonathan?" she imperiously returned. "Tell me instantly."

"Oh, my lady—I heard something about murder, and taking my master before the magistrates for examination."

She did not believe it; she quite laughed at Jonathan. But at that moment they came out again, and Mr. Carlton advanced to her. There was that in his aspect which caused his wife to cower against the door-post. Or was it that her own vague fears were frightening her?

"Laura, I am going out on business to the town-hall. I shan't be longer than I can help."

Her faint cry resounded through the hall. It seemed such a confirmation of the words spoken by the servant.

"Oh, Lewis, what is it? Jonathan says it is something about murder!"

"Nonsense, nonsense!" he peevishly exclaimed. "It is some absurd mistake, which I shall soon set right. Don't be foolish; I shall be home to dinner."

There was no time for more. It seemed but the work of a moment. Mr. Carlton went out and walked up the street, one of the policemen by his side, the other marching behind.

Utterly bewildered, as much with the suddenness of the affair as

anything, Lady Laura gazed around her for some explanation. But all she met was the startled face of Jonathan, not a whit less astounded than that of his mistress. Passionate and impetuous, she dashed out to the front gate, looking after them, as if that would afford her some clue to the mystery. It was just what the sailor-earl would have done.

And there Lady Laura became aware of the fact that a small mob were attending on the steps of Mr. Carlton and his escorters. The fact was, some version of the affair had got wind in the town, and people were up in arms. More and more astonished, Lady Laura perhaps would have gone after them, but she caught sight of Mrs. Pepperfly, who had come into contact with the mob at the gate, and was not improved in temper thereby. Lady Laura knew the nurse by sight, had occasionally spoken to her, and she stopped her.

"Tell me what the matter is!" she panted. "*You* know."

Mrs. Pepperfly's first movement was to go as quickly as she could into the house and pull Lady Laura with her. The old woman shut the dining-room door upon them, leaving poor Jonathan alone in the hall.

"If you don't tell me at once, I shall die," came the passionate appeal. "What is it?"

"It's one of them there ways of Providence we hears on when we has time to go to church," was Mrs. Pepperfly's lucid answer. "To think that we should have lived all these years and never suspected Mr. Carlton!—and him attending of the child every day at Tupper's cottage! But murder will out. Yours is hard lines, my poor lady?"

Lady Laura, in her terrible suspense, her vehement impatience, almost shook her. Thought is very quick—and it was only that morning she had heard of the child's death.

"Has *he* been murdered?—that child at Tupper's cottage?"

"He!" responded Mrs. Pepperfly. "Bless your ladyship's dear heart, he went off natural, like a lamb, with his bad knee. It's his unfortunate mother."

"Is *she* dead?" gasped Lady Laura, still more apprehensive ideas arising to her. "She, the woman?"

"Not her," cried Mrs. Pepperfly, jerking her head in indication of Tupper's cottage. "She wasn't his mother at all, as it turns out. It were that——"

"Not his mother!" interrupted Lady Laura; and all the absurdity of her past jealousy seemed to rise up before her in a moment, as it had done just before.

"No more nor me," said Mrs. Pepperfly. "It were that other unfortunate, what I nursed my own self, my lady; she as was cut

off by the prussic acid in Palace Street, and they do say it were Mr. Carlton that dropped it in. And her name was—— Oh, dear, but it's hard lines for all your ladyships!"

"Her name was what?" asked Laura, with blanched lips.

"Not Mrs. Crane at all, my lady, but Clarice Chesney. That is, Mrs. Carlton; for they say she was his wife."

Lady Laura sank into a chair, terror-stricken, powerless. Mrs. Pepperfly, who was troubled with no superfluous sensitiveness on her own score, and did not suspect that other people were so, continued:

"Folks tells of the finger of Fate, and such like incomprehension, but if Fate's finger haven't been in this here pie, it never were in one yet. It have all come to light through a letter, my lady. A letter of Mr. Carlton's, which they say your ladyship found and got out of a place where it had laid for years, and gave it to my Lady Jane Chesney. And that letter have brought it home to him, and the justices had it right afore their noses when they give the warrant to take him up."

She sat back in her chair, her eyes dilating, her countenance one living horror. She! That letter! Had *her* underhand work, her dishonourable treachery towards her husband, brought this to pass? Oh, miserable Laura Carlton! Surely the remembrance would henceforth haunt her for ever!

"Now, poor dear lady, don't take on so! We all have to bear; some in our minds, and some in our bodies; and some in our husbands, and some in having none. There ain't nothing more soothing than a glass of gin-and-water," added the sympathizing Mrs. Pepperfly, "which can be had in a moment, where the kitchen biler's always on the bile."

She turned about her rotund person to see if she could discover any signs of the chief ingredient for compounding the cordial. The interrupted luncheon on the table, cold though it was now, looked tempting, as did the long green bottle, which Mrs. Pepperfly supposed contained some foreign sort of wine, and there was a sideboard with suggestive-looking cupboards in it. The old woman talked on, but Laura seemed dead to hearing, lying back with the same glassy stare, and the look of horror on her white face.

"If your ladyship wouldn't object to my ringing of the bell, and asking for a spoonful of biling water from the servants, I'd soon bring the colour back to your cheeks. What a world this might be, my dear lady, if our minds never met with no upsets. I have been upset too with the news this morning, and ain't recovered yet. And there was that pest of a crowd I got into outside, a-poking in of my ribs and a-breaking of my shins! A quarter of a tumbler——"

"Come home with me, Laura," interrupted a soft voice, subdued

in its grief, "come home with me. Oh, child, this is hard for us all; cruelly hard for you. Let me take you, Laura; my home shall henceforth be yours. Our father seemed to foresee storms for you when he was dying, and left you to me, he said, should they ever come."

Laura rose up, her eyes flashing, her face hot with anger, and stood defiantly before Lady Jane.

"Did *you* denounce him? Did you treacherously show the letter you took away with you? It was well done, Lady Jane!"

Jane bent her sorrowful face, so calm and good in its pity, upon the passionate one. "It is not I who have done it, Laura. Denounce your husband? No, I would have carried the secret with me to the grave, for your sake."

Laura sank down again in a revulsion of feeling, and burst into a flood of tears most distressing to witness. She laid her head on her sister's bosom, and openly avowed the part she had enacted, regarding the safe and the skeleton key. Remorse was taking possession of her. And Mrs. Pepperfly, subdued to meekness in her astonishment, dropped a silent curtsey and retired, grieving over the hot gin-and-water which might have been so near.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE EXAMINATION.

SOMEWHERE about the hour that Mr. Carlton's arrest took place, or possibly a little later, Lady Grey was sitting at work in her house in Savile Row, when a telegraphic despatch was brought in from Great Wennock. She did not open it; it was addressed to Sir Stephen; but she believed she knew what the contents must be, and smiled to herself over her sewing.

"Another excuse for a day or two more with Lucy," she said to her husband when he came in, as she handed him the message.

"Then I shall send Mr. Fred a peremptory mandate," returned Sir Stephen, not feeling pleased. "He ought to have been up a week ago. Halloa! what's this?"

"Great Wennock Station, one o'clock, P.M. Frederick Grey to Sir Stephen Grey, M.D.

"The mystery of the prussic acid is on the point of discovery. Come off at once, if possible. I have heard you say you should like to be present at the clearing-up. Tell my mother I was right."

Sir Stephen read it twice over to himself and then aloud to his

wife. "What a strange thing!" he exclaimed, in the surprise of the moment. "And 'tell my mother I was right!' What on earth does he mean, Mary?"

Lady Grey gave no very clear answer. She had never spoken of her son's rash, and, as she deemed, unjustifiable suspicion of Mr. Carlton, and she would not speak of it now.

"Shall you go down, Stephen?"

"This very moment. There happens to be nothing to prevent me to-day, and I would go to the end of the world to be proved blameless in the eyes of South Wennock. I hope I shall just catch a train!"

In point of fact, Frederick Grey had been made aware a little earlier than the general public, of what was going on before the magistrates, and he had mounted a fleet horse and sent off the telegram to his father. He would not have helped to bring the guilt home to Mr. Carlton; nay, he would have suppressed it had it lain in his power; but if it was to be done, it was well that his father should be present at his own vindication.

He rode more leisurely back again; but not very leisurely either, for South Wennock was in excitement to-day. He found the examination of Mr. Carlton already begun, and every one connected with it deep in the proceedings.

He might have walked on the people's heads in the vicinity of the court. Not a tenth part could get into the small place designated by the grand name of town-hall. Never had South Wennock been in similar commotion. All that had occurred at those past proceedings, connected with the death of Mrs. Crane, was as nothing to this.

But the crowd recognized his right to a place, as the son of the once-accused Stephen Grey; the justices did the same; and Frederick was politely offered about an inch and a half of room on the bench. His uncle John occupied a seat on it. People made much of the Greys that day.

Frederick found the examination tolerably advanced. Mrs. Smith had given her evidence in public, declaring all she knew and all she suspected. For, allow me to tell you, you who are not aware of the fact, that a bench of country justices consults its own curiosity as to what it shall and shall not hear, and sometimes has a very indefinite notion indeed as to whether such and such evidence can be legally tendered. The justices' own opinion stands for law in many places. Judith Ford was under examination when Frederick entered, and the prisoner, as we are compelled to call Mr. Carlton, constantly interrupted it, and fell into hot squabbles with his counsel in consequence. This gentleman was a Mr. Billiter, universally called Lawyer Billiter by South Wennock. He had been sent for in great haste to watch the case for Mr. Carlton, and was exerting himself

to the utmost: they had been intimate acquaintances. Mr. Carlton stood his ground with calm equanimity. He was very pale, but no one in South Wennock had ever seen him otherwise; and at moments he stirred as if restless. Calm, good-looking, gentlemanly, he appeared little suited to his position in that court.

"I protest against this going on," he was saying for about the fiftieth time, as Frederick Grey edged himself on to the bench. "I protest against this woman's evidence. I say—as I said at the time—that the person who lay ill was a stranger to me; what interest, then, could I——"

"Now, Carlton, I won't have it," interrupted Lawyer Billiter, wiping his hot face. "I declare, if you ruin your cause in this manner, I'll leave you to it. Be quiet, and trust to me."

"But I did *not* know her, and I shall say it," persisted the prisoner. "I ask what motive——"

"We cannot hear this, Mr. Carlton," at length interposed the bench, tolerant hitherto, for Mr. Carlton was not an ordinary prisoner. "You can make your defence at the proper moment; this is only wasting the time of the bench, and can do you no possible good. You must let the witness give her evidence."

The witness looked rather uncertain what to do, what with the gaze of the crowded court, and Mr. Carlton's interruptions. It was evident that Judith Ford was not a very willing witness.

"Go on, witness," said the magistrate. "You looked into the room, you say, and saw Mr. Carlton. What was he doing?"

"He had a small bottle in his hand, sir," replied Judith; "a very tiny bottle. But that he held it up, right in the light, I should not have been able to distinguish what it was. He was putting the cork into it, and then he dropped it into his waistcoat pocket. After that he took up the other bottle——"

"What bottle?" interrupted Lawyer Billiter, snapping up Judith.

"The other bottle that stood on the cheffonier, close to his hand. It was a bottle the size of those sent in by Mr. Stephen Grey with the night draughts. The cork lay by it, and he took up the cork very quickly and put it into the bottle——"

"You can't swear that it was the bottle and draught just sent in by Mr. Stephen Grey."

"No," said Judith, "but I think it was. I could see that it had a label on it, and it was full of medicine. No other bottle in the house, except that, was full that night, as was testified to by the nurse at the inquest."

"But——"

"Go on, witness," interposed the bench, drowning Mr. Carlton's "but."

"When Mr. Carlton had corked it up," resumed the witness,

"he placed it in a corner of the shelf of the cheffonier, and came out of the room very quickly; so quickly, that I had no time to get away. I went to the side of the landing, and stood against the wall, but——"

"Where he would pass you as he went downstairs?"

"Oh no, sir, he would not pass me; I was further up, nearer to the bedroom door. He saw me standing there; at least, he saw my face, and spoke, asking what I was; but I did not answer, and he looked alarmed. While he went back for the light, I slipped into the broom-closet near the bedroom."

"But you were not the dark man with whiskers, to whom allusion has been so often made?" exclaimed one of the astonished magistrates.

"Yes, I was, sir; at least I was what Mr. Carlton took to be a man. I had my cheeks tied up with black plush, on account of faceache, and the plush and the frilled black border of my cap looked just like whiskers in the uncertain light."

"But why did you disguise yourself like that?" was the inquiry of the magistrate, when the surprise had in some degree subsided. "What was your motive?"

"I beg your pardon, sir, but I had not meant it for any disguise," replied Judith. "I had no thought of such a thing. My face was in great pain and much swollen, and Mr. Stephen Grey had told me I ought to tie it up. I had no other motive in doing it. Had I waited for Mr. Carlton to see me when he brought out the light, he would have known who it was."

"This is a most extraordinary avowal, witness!" struck in Lawyer Billiter, who indeed spoke only in accordance with his own opinion and the general feeling. "Pray, had you any knowledge of Mr. Carlton previous to this?"

"Not any," was the reply. "I had seen him passing in the street in his carriage, and knew him by sight from that circumstance; but he had never seen me in his life."

"And now, witness, what was your motive for watching Mr. Carlton from the landing on this night, as you tell us you did?"

"I had no motive," was the earnest reply of the witness; "I did not purposely watch him. When I heard a movement in the room as I got to the top of the stairs, I feared it was Mrs. Crane—as I have stated to you—and I looked in quietly, thinking how very imprudent it was of her. I did not know that any one except Mrs. Crane was upstairs. I had no idea Mr. Carlton was there. But when I looked in I saw it was Mr. Carlton, and I saw him doing what I have told you. It all happened in an instant, as it were, and he came out before I could well get away from the door."

"And why did you not avow who you were when he asked, instead of getting away?"

"Again I must say that I had no ill motive in doing it," replied the witness. "I felt like an eavesdropper, as if I had looked in upon what did not concern me, and I did not like Mr. Carlton to know I had been there. I declare that I had no other motive. I have wished many a time since, when people have been talking and suspecting the 'man on the stairs,' that I had allowed myself to be seen."

"And you mean to tell us that you could go up these stairs and into this closet without Mr. Carlton's hearing you?"

"Oh yes. I had on my sick-room shoes. They were made of list; soles and all."

"Did you suspect, witness, that Mr. Carlton was doing anything wrong with the medicine?" asked one of the magistrates.

"No, sir; I never thought of such a thing. It never occurred to me to think anything wrong until the next morning, when I was told Mrs. Crane had died through taking the draught, and that it was found to have been poisoned. I doubted then. I remembered the words of greeting I had heard pass between Mr. Carlton and his patient, proving that they were well acquainted with each other; but still I thought it could not be possible that Mr. Carlton would do anything so wicked. It was only at the inquest when I heard him swear to what I knew was false that I really suspected him."

"It's as good as a play," ironically spoke Lawyer Billiter. "I hope your worships will have the goodness to take notes of the testimony of this witness. What she says is most extraordinary, most incredible," he continued, looking from one part of the packed audience to the other. "In my opinion it is tainted with the gravest suspicion. First of all she deposes to a cock-and-bull story of hearing terms of endearment pass between Mr. Carlton and his patient, to whom he had only then been called in as a medical attendant; and next she tells this incredible tale of the bottles! Why should she, above all others, have been seated in the dark in Mrs. Crane's bedroom that first night?—Why should she, above all others, have come stealing up the stairs the second night, still in the dark, just at the particular time that Mr. Carlton was there? This by-play amidst the bottles, that she professes to have witnessed, can only be compared to so many conjuring tricks! How was it, if she did so come up, that the landlady of the house, Mrs. Gould, and the nurse Pepperfly, did not see her? They——"

"I beg your pardon, sir, for interrupting," said Judith. "They were, both times, at supper in the kitchen. I saw them as I went by. I have already said so."

"Allow me to finish, young woman," reproved Lawyer Billiter.

"I say," he added, addressing the court collectively: "that this witness's evidence is incomprehensible; it is fraught with the gravest doubt. To a clear judgment it may appear very like a pure invention, a tale got up to divert suspicion from herself. It remains yet to be seen whether she was not the one who tampered with the draught—if it *was* tampered with—and now seeks to throw the guilt upon another. Have the goodness to answer this question, witness: if you perceived all this committed by Mr. Carlton, how came it that you did not declare it at the time?"

"I have said," replied Judith, in some agitation—"because I feared that I should not be believed. I feared it might be met in the manner that you, sir, are now meeting it. I feared the very suspicion might be turned upon me; as you are now trying to turn it."

"You feared that your unsupported testimony would not weigh against Mr. Carlton?" interposed one of the magistrates.

"Yes, sir," replied Judith. "I did not really suspect Mr. Carlton until after the inquest, and there was a feeling upon me then of not liking to speak as I had not spoken before. People would have asked me why I kept it in. Besides, I never felt *quite* sure that Mr. Carlton had done it: it seemed so impossible to believe it."

"And, confessing this, you now take upon yourself to assert that Mr. Carlton was dropping the prussic acid into the draught while you were looking at him through the door?" sharply asked Lawyer Billiter.

"I don't assert anything of the kind," returned Judith. "I have only said what I saw him do with the bottles; I have said nothing more."

"Oh," said Lawyer Billiter, "you have said nothing more, haven't you, young woman! I think it must strike everybody that you have insinuated more, if you have not said it. Your worships," he added, turning to the bench, "there is not, as it appears to me, a tittle of evidence that ought to weigh against Mr. Carlton. He tells you that the young lady, Mrs. Crane, came here a stranger to him as she did to all others, and there is not a shade of proof that this is untrue; that he ever knew her before. You cannot condemn a man like Mr. Carlton upon the sole testimony of an obscure witness; a servant girl who comes forward with a confession of things that, if true, should have been declared years ago. With the exception of certain words she says she heard pass between Mr. Carlton and the sick lady, there's no evidence whatever that they were not strangers to each other——"

"You forget the letter written by the lady to Mr. Carlton the night of her arrival," interrupted one of the magistrates, alluding to the unfortunate letter found by Lady Laura, and which had brought on the trouble.

"Not at all, your worship," undauntedly returned the lawyer. "There's no proof that that letter was addressed to Mr. Carlton—was ever in his possession. The woman Smith's story of its having been handed to her by the Lady Jane Chesney, and that Lady Jane received it from Mr. Carlton's wife, goes for nothing. I might take a letter from my pocket, hand it to your worship, and say that the party from whom I received it told me he had had it from the Khan of Tartary; but it mightn't be any nearer the truth for his saying it."

There was a smile in the hall. Mr. Carlton touched his lawyer on the sleeve, and the latter bent to him.

"What letter is it that is in question?"

For it was a positive fact that Mr. Carlton, up to this moment, had heard nothing of the letter. The policeman who arrested him had not mentioned it: and, on his arrival at the town-hall, the proceedings were commenced in so much haste and confusion that he had only a vague idea of the details of the charge. Lawyer Billiter was sent for afterwards; and he gathered his necessary information from others, more than from the prisoner.

"Don't you know about it?" returned the lawyer, in a whisper. "Haven't you seen the letter? Why, it's that letter that has done three parts of the mischief?"

"I have not seen or heard of any letter. Where did it come from?"

"Out of some safe in your cellar,—as I am given to understand. It's an awkward letter, mind you, Carlton," added the lawyer, confidentially, "unless you can explain it away."

"Have they been searching my house?" asked Mr. Carlton, haughtily, answering the only portion of the explanation which had struck him.

"Not at all. I'm not sure that the bench know how it was obtained yet, except that Lady Jane Chesney lent it to that Mrs. Smith for an hour or two; and her ladyship said she had it from Lady Laura. I met Pepperfly——"

"But there was no letter in the safe," interrupted Mr. Carlton, puzzled by the words. "I don't know what you mean. Can I see the letter?"

Lawyer Billiter asked permission of the bench, and the letter was handed to Mr. Carlton. To describe his mental astonishment when he saw the letter that he thought he had burnt years and years before, would be impossible. He turned it about in his hands, just as he had once turned about the torn portion of its copy before the coroner; he read it word by word; he gazed at its faded characters, faded by the hand of Time; and he could not make it out at all. The court gathered nothing from his aspect, save surprise—surprise that looked genuine.

"I protest—I know nothing of this letter!" he exclaimed. "It is none of mine."

"It was found in your possession, in a safe that you keep locked in your cellar," said the bench, who were wiser than Mr. Billiter thought.

"It never was found there," returned Mr. Carlton impressively. "I deny it entirely. I declare that I never had such a letter there as this. I knew some vile conspiracy must be at work!"

"Don't you recognize the letter, Mr. Carlton?" inquired the bench, who were still deferent to Mr. Carlton, and could not address him or treat him as they did prisoners in ordinary.

"How can I recognize a letter that I never saw before?"

"You have seen part of it before, at any rate. You must remember the portion of a letter produced at the inquest on Mrs. Crane. The inference to be drawn now is, that she abandoned that letter in writing it on account of the blot she made, and began this fresh one. The words in both are the same."

"Are they the same?" rejoined Mr. Carlton. "I had forgotten; it is a long while ago. But to whom was this letter written?"

"You perceive that it is addressed to you?"

"I perceive that my name is on the cover, the envelope. How it got there, or what it all means, I am at a loss to imagine. This letter appears to be written to the lady's husband, not to me, her medical attendant."

"The deduction sought to be drawn from the letter is, that it was written to you *as* her husband. Of course, that is not yet proved."

"I beg to thank your worship for that admission," volubly spoke Lawyer Billiter. "It is *not* proved. On the contrary, it will not be my client's fault, or mine either, if we do not prove that the whole charge is false, arising, it may be, out of some strange mistake. A more improbable charge was certainly never brought against a medical man. Why should Mr. Carlton deliberately kill a patient—a young lady whom he was called in to attend, a perfect stranger to him? He——"

"If the greeting, testified to by the witness, Judith Ford, may be believed, she was not a stranger to him, Mr. Billiter."

"True, your worship; but you will scarcely feel inclined, I fancy, to accept that young woman's word before Mr. Carlton's. I repeat, there's not a shadow of proof, if you put that witness's word aside, that Mr. Carlton had any previous acquaintance with Mrs. Crane. All the probabilities tend the other way; and, without that proof, it is impossible to pursue this charge against him. Mrs. Crane herself spoke of Mr. Carlton as a stranger to her, as she did of the Messrs. Grey. The Widow Gould——"

It seemed that Lawyer Billiter's eloquence was fated to be continually interrupted. A noise at the back of the hall caused him to turn angrily. "What was the cause of the noise?" the magistrates as angrily demanded, and they were answered by their clerk, Mr. Drone.

"Some important evidence has arrived from town, your worships."

Important evidence from town! Their worships gazed in the direction of the commotion; everybody else gazed; the prisoner gazed. But all that could be seen was the blooming person of Mrs. Pepperfly, who was late in making her appearance, and was not altogether steady on the legs. Some policemen were endeavouring to force a way for her through the dense crowd, for they supposed her testimony would be wanted; but their efforts were useless. A slender figure might have been passed through, but Mrs. Pepperfly, never. Groaning, exhausted, a martyr to heat, and dreadfully cross, she commenced a fight with those around her as effectually as her crushed state permitted.

But the stir, while it baffled Mrs. Pepperfly, enabled another to get through the mass: a tall, slim young man, who twisted in and out like an eel, and got to the front at last.

He was the important evidence from town; that is, he had brought it with him. After conferring a few moments with Mr. Drone, he took from his pocket-book a folded paper. Mr. Drone inspected it with curious eyes, and then handed it to the waiting magistrates.

It was a copy of the certificate of a marriage solemnized in London, at St. Pancras Old Church, early in the month of July, 1847, between Lewis Carlton and Clarice Beauchamp.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE REMAND.

THE copy of the certificate of a marriage solemnized at St. Pancras Old Church early in the month of July, 1847, between Lewis Carlton and Clarice Beauchamp.

The magistrates gazed at the document as they sat on the bench, and handed it about from one to another, and glanced at Mr. Carlton. Even so. It was that gentleman's marriage certificate with the unhappy lady of whom he had denied all knowledge, whom—there could be no doubt now—he had destroyed.

The magistrates glanced at Mr. Carlton. A change had come over his face; as much change as could come over one so impassive; and a fanciful observer might have said that he cowered. He knew that all was over; that any attempt to struggle against

his fate and the condemning facts heaping themselves one after another upon his head, would be utterly futile. Nevertheless, he rallied after the first moment's shock, and raised himself to his full height—cold, uncompromising, ready to hold out to the last. Of the sea of eyes bent upon him from every part of the crowded hall, he disliked most to meet those of Frederick Grey; he remembered the boy's open, honest accusation of him in the years gone by.

The gentleman who had brought the paper into the hall was called forward and sworn. His name was James Chesterton, he said. He had been articled clerk to Mr. Friar, the solicitor, of Bedford Row, and was with him still, though the term of his articles had expired. In consequence of a telegram received the previous night from Mr. Drone, he had gone the first thing that morning to search the register of St. Pancras Old Church, and found in it the record of the marriage of which that certificate was a copy.

"You certify that this is a true copy?" asked the chief magistrate.

"A true copy," replied the witness, "exact in every particular. The clerk who was with me when I copied it said he was present when the marriage took place, and remembered the parties quite well. He had a suspicion that it was a secret marriage, and that caused him to observe them particularly. The lady——"

"And pray what cause had he to suspect that it was a secret marriage?" sharply interrupted Lawyer Billiter.

"I asked him the same question," quietly answered the witness. "He said that the parties came to the church quite alone, and the young lady was dressed in every-day clothes. He could not help looking at her, he said, she was so beautiful."

"And that was the clerk, you say?"

"I supposed him to be the clerk; if not the actual clerk, some deputy acting for him."

Lawyer Billiter fired up. He was about to deny that the Lewis Carlton then present was obliged to have been that bridegroom, when he was silenced by the bench. The chief magistrate read the certificate aloud for Mr. Carlton's benefit, and then turned to him.

"Prisoner," said he,—and it was the first time they had called him prisoner—"what have you to say to this?"

"I shall not say anything," returned the prisoner. "If evidence is to be brought against me about which I know nothing, how can I be prepared to refute it?"

"You cannot say that you know nothing of the marriage of which this certificate is a copy of the record. Can you still deny that the unfortunate young lady was your wife?"

There was a pause. It is possible that a doubt was passing through Mr. Carlton's mind as to whether he could still deny that fact. If so, it might be abandoned as useless. There were certain

officials connected with St. Pancras Church still—and he knew it—who could swear to his person.

"If she was my wife, that does not prove that I—poisoned her," he returned.

"It goes some way towards it, though," said the magistrate, forgetting official reticence in the moment's excitement.

The words were drowned by a loud murmur that burst simultaneously from many parts of the hall, and bore an unpleasant sound. It was not unlike an expression of popular opinion, boding no good feeling to the prisoner. John Bull is apt to be on occasion inconveniently impulsive, and Mr. Carlton was losing ground.

"Silence!" shouted the chairman, in anger. "Prisoner," he added, turning to Mr. Carlton as the sounds died away, "if my memory serves me right, you swore before the coroner at the inquest that you knew nothing of this letter or of its handwriting. What do you say now?"

What could he say, with that certificate lying there? In spite of the high tone he assumed, he stood there a sorry picture of convicted guilt. Just at that moment, however, the fact of the production of the letter was occupying his mind more than anything else, for he believed its resuscitation to be nothing short of a miracle.

"I do know nothing of the letter," replied the prisoner, in answer to the chairman's question. "Some conspiracy must have been got up against me, and I am its victim. It may yet be cleared up."

That was the utmost acknowledgment they could get from him. But, of course, plain as the proofs were, he was not bound to incriminate himself. Lawyer Billiter, whose zeal rose with the danger and the necessity for exertion in his client's cause, talked himself hoarse, and twisted the evidence of the witnesses into various plausible contortions. All in vain. The case, with the production of that marriage certificate, had assumed altogether a different complexion, and the deference with which the justices of South Wennock had been at first inclined to treat Mr. Carlton, was exchanged for uncompromising official firmness.

The examination lasted until dark, when candles were brought in: the twilight of a winter's evening steals upon us all too quickly. The town-hall had not yet been improved by gas or lamps—South Wennock was only a slow country place—and there were no means of lighting it, if lights were required, except by candles. Four were brought, to be placed in any convenient spot. Mr. Drone's clerk got one on his desk, the acting beadle held another in his hand, and the other two were disposed of where they could be. The hall—or court, as South Wennock was wont to call it—presented a strange view in that glimmering and uncertain light: the dense crowd and their lifted faces, the excited aspect of those taking part in the

proceedings, the hot defiance of Lawyer Billiter's countenance, and the calmly impassive one of the prisoner.

But it was shortly found not practicable to conclude the examination that day, and the magistrates remanded it until the morrow. That would close it, and there was not a shadow of doubt on any mind present, including the zealous one of Lawyer Billiter, that Lewis Carlton would then be committed to the county jail to take his trial for the wilful murder of Clarice Beauchamp, otherwise Clarice Beauchamp Chesney, otherwise Clarice Beauchamp Carlton. The various names were being bandied about the court in an undertone; carping spirits had already mooted the question—could the young lady have been his real wife in point of law, as she had not been married in the name of Chesney?

"The prisoner is remanded, and the magistrates will meet at ten o'clock to-morrow," came forth the announcement, after the Bench had conferred together for a few moments.

"Of course your worships will take bail," said Lawyer Billiter, boldly.

"Bail!" repeated the magistrates, wondering whether the demand in a parallel case had ever been made before to a Bench in its senses. "Not if the whole town offered it."

The whole town apparently had no intention of doing anything of the sort. Rather the contrary. A certain portion of it—not the most respectable, you may be sure—were anticipating the pleasure of escorting Mr. Carlton to his abode for the night, and in a manner more emphatic than agreeable.

"Let the unwashed ruffians get off first," whispered Lawyer Billiter to Mr. Carlton. "You shall stop here until the coast's clear."

The hall was emptying itself. Gentlemen, whether magistrates, audience, or lawyers, stood in groups to say a word on the marvels of that day. They were indeed scarcely credible, and half South Wennock held a latent impression that they should wake up in the morning and find the charge against Mr. Carlton to have been nothing more than a dream. One of that audience, however, gave himself no time to say a word to anybody. He escaped with all the speed he could, dashed into the Red Lion, and nearly into the arms of its landlady, who was as excited as any one.

"Has the omnibus started, Mrs. Fitch?"

"This ten minutes ago, sir."

"There! I feared it would be so. Well, you must let me have a conveyance of some sort, a gig or carriage, anything that will go quickly."

"Surely you are not going to London to-night, Mr. Frederick?"

"Not I. I shall stay now to see this unhappy play out. No; I'll tell you a secret, but don't go and let it out to the town. I have

telegraphed for my father, and expect him down by the seven-o'clock train. It will be something, won't it, to be cleared in the eyes of South Wennock?"

"You expect Sir Stephen down!" she exclaimed, in excitement. "I should think you do want a carriage for him. He shan't come into the town obscurely on a joyful occasion like this—joyful to him. You shall have that new barouche and pair, Mr. Frederick, and if I had four horses——"

"Just do be sensible," interrupted Frederick with a laugh. "A barouche and four! you'd not get Sir Stephen into it. Look here, Mrs. Fitch," he added gravely, "if Sir Stephen has cause to rejoice at his own clearing, think how sad the news will be to him for the sake of others!—how intimate he is with some of the Chesneys."

"True, true; soon to be connected with them," murmured Mrs. Fitch. "Well, you shall have the barouche out soberly, Mr. Frederick. And indeed it comes to that, or nothing, this evening, for every other vehicle is in use."

Whether this was quite true, might be a question. Mrs. Fitch hurried off, and the barouche, with a pair of post-horses, came out. Too impatient to care much how he reached Great Wennock, provided he did reach it, Frederick Grey jumped in, and was driven off. He would not for the world have missed being the first to impart the tidings to his father.

The train came in, and Sir Stephen with it. "You are grand!" he exclaimed, surveying the barouche as his son hurried him into it.

"Mrs. Fitch had no other conveyance at liberty. At least she said so. Get in, sir."

"And what have you to say for yourself, young gentleman—losing so much time down here?" inquired Sir Stephen as they drove off.

"I was coming up to-day, but for something that has happened," returned Frederick. "I'll go back when you go, if you like, sir."

"And what business have you brought me down upon? What has turned up?"

"Your exoneration, sir, for one thing, has turned up. I hope the town won't eat you, but it is on wild stilts to-night. And next, the real delinquent has turned up, and has been close at hand all the while. He who dropped the prussic acid into your wholesome mixture."

"Dropped it purposely?"

"Purposely, without doubt; intending, I fear, to kill Mrs. Crane."

"And where was it done?" again interrupted Sir Stephen, too eager to listen patiently. "Dick was not waylaid, surely, after all his protestations to the contrary?"

"Dick delivered the medicine safely, and what was added to it

was added to it after it was in the house; whilst the bottle waited in the room adjoining the sick chamber."

"That face on the stairs!" exclaimed Sir Stephen in excitement. "I knew it was no illusion. A matter-of-fact, commonsense man, like Carlton, could not have fancied such a thing. It was her husband, I suppose?"

"It was her husband, sure enough, who tampered with the medicine; but that person on the stairs, a living breathing person, was not her husband. Father, I know I shall shock you. He who was, it's to be feared, guilty—the husband—was Lewis Carlton himself."

Sir Stephen roused up from his corner of the barouche, and stared at his son's face, as well as he could in the starry night

"What nonsense are you talking now, Frederick?"

"I wish it was nonsense, sir, for the sake of our common humanity. If this tale is true, one can't help feeling that Carlton is a disgrace to it."

"Let me hear the grounds of suspicion," said Sir Stephen, when he had recovered from his astonishment. "It will take strong proof, I can tell you, Fred, before I shall believe this of Carlton."

Frederick Grey told the story as circumstantially as he could. It was scarcely ended when they reached South Wennock. Sir Stephen, whether he believed it or not, was most profoundly struck with it; it excited him in no common degree. It was only fit for a romance, he remarked, not for an episode in real life.

"One of the most remarkable features in it, Frederick, assuming the guilt of Mr. Carlton, is that he should never once have been suspected by any one!"

"I suspected him," was the answer.

"You? Nonsense!"

"I did, indeed," said Frederick in a low tone. "A suspicion arose in my mind at the moment when we stood round Mrs. Crane as she lay dead. And he saw that I doubted him too! Do you remember that he wanted to get me out of the room that night, but Uncle John spoke up and said I might be trusted?"

"Good gracious!" cried Sir Stephen in his simple way: "I can't understand all this. What did you suspect him of?"

"I don't know. I did not know at the time. What I felt sure of was, that he was not *true* in the matter: that he knew more about it than he would say. I saw it in his manner; I heard it in his voice; I was sure of it when he gave his evidence afterwards at the inquest. I told my mother this; but she wouldn't listen to me."

"You must have been a strange sort of young gentleman, Frederick!"

"So Mr. Carlton thought, when I told *him*. You know when

he laid that cane about my shoulders, and you assured me, by way of consolation, that I must have brought it upon myself by some insolence? In one sense I had done so; for I had been telling him that I suspected him of having something to do with Mrs. Crane's death. Lady Jane Chesney heard me say it, for the encounter took place at her garden gate, and she happened to be standing near. No wonder he raised his cane. The only marvel to me now, looking back, is that he did not three parts kill me. I know I was insolent. But there's something worse than all behind, that I have not yet spoken of."

"What's that?" asked Sir Stephen.

"Well, it's very dreadful: not altogether pleasant to talk about. That first wife, that poor Mrs. Crane, turns out to have been the lost daughter of the Earl of Oakburn."

Sir Stephen felt confounded. "My boy! what is it that you are telling me?"

"Nothing but the miserable truth. She was Clarice Chesney. You may guess what this discovery is, altogether, for Lady Jane. So far, however, Mr Carlton must be exonerated. From what can be gleaned, it would appear that he never knew she was connected with them,—never knew her for a Chesney,—only as Miss Beauchamp, and she married him under that name alone."

"I never heard anything so painful in my life," exclaimed Sir Stephen. "But why should—— Frederick, what in the world's all this?"

He might well exclaim! They had turned into the street at South Wennock, and found themselves in the midst of a dense and excited crowd. The fact was, Mrs. Fitch, who was no more capable of keeping a secret than are ladies in general, had spread the news abroad that Sir Stephen Grey was arriving in a barouche and pair; and she hoped they'd cheer him.

The recommendation was needless. Gathered there waiting for the carriage, the mob broke out with one loud shout of acclamation when it came in sight. "Long live Sir Stephen Grey! Would he ever forgive them for having suspected him?—they'd never forgive themselves. Health, and joy, and long life to Sir Stephen Grey!"

They pressed round the barouche. Sir Stephen was not eaten up, but his hands were nearly shaken off. And before he was at all aware of what the mob were about, they had unharnessed the horses, sent them away with the post-boy, and were harnessing themselves to the carriage, squabbling and fighting which and how many should enjoy the honour. In this manner, shouting, hurrahing, and gesticulating, they commenced to draw Sir Stephen towards his brother's.

Frederick did not admire being made much of. He opened the door to leap out, but, with the mob extending some yards round about, it could not be done without danger. He remonstrated, and Sir Stephen remonstrated, but only to draw forth fresh cheers and an increased rate of speed. So they were obliged, perforce, to resign themselves to their fate, the good-humoured Sir Stephen laughing and nodding incessantly.

Suddenly there was a halt, a stoppage, a check to the triumphal car. The mob had come into contact with another mob, who had been waiting round the town-hall for Mr. Carlton to emerge from it. That gentleman, escorted by the whole police force of South Wennock, consisting of about six, was in front, with the attendant mob dancing around. The two mobs joined voice, and the shouts for Sir Stephen Grey changed into yells of anger.

They were abreast, the barouche and the prisoner, and neither could stir one way or the other, for the mob had it all their own way. The few policemen were quite powerless.

"Down with him! Let's have lynch law for once! What right had he, knowing what he'd done, to come into our houses, doctoring our wives and children? Let's serve him out, as he served her out! Here goes!"

Another moment, and Mr. Carlton would have been in their hands, at their cruel mercy, but Sir Stephen Grey rose up to the rescue. He stood in the carriage and bared his head while he addressed the excited mob; the flaring light from a butcher's shop shining full on his face.

"If you touch Mr. Carlton by so much as a finger, you are not my fellow-townsmen, my good old neighbours of South Wennock, and I will never again meet you as such. I thought you were Englishmen! If Mr. Carlton is accused of crime, is there not the law of his country to judge him? You are not the law; you are not his accusers; he has not injured you. My friends, in this moment, when you have made me happy by your welcome, don't do anything to mar it; don't make me ashamed of you!"

"It was he drove you from the town, Sir Stephen. It was he, with his lies against you, made us think ill of you, and turn our backs upon the truest friend we ever had."

"That's not your affair; that's mine: he did not drive you from the town. If I forgive and forget the past, surely you can do it. Carlton," he impulsively said, "I do forgive you heartily for any wrong they think you may have done me, and I wish you well, and I hope you'll get off—that is, if you can feel that you ought to do so," Sir Stephen added, unpleasant reminiscences of what his son had said intruding into his frank good nature. "I wish you no ill, I'm sure; I wish you hearty good luck. And, my men, as you have

undertaken to escort me to my brother's, I desire that you'll go on with me, that I may wish *you* no ill. Come! don't keep me here, perched in the cold."

His half-careless, half-authoritative, and wholly kind tone had the desired effect. The barouche was dragged on again, and the mob, to a man, followed after it, setting up their cheers again.

"Thank you, Sir Stephen," said Mr. Carlton, throwing back the words as he resumed his walk between the policemen.

A minute more, and there was another interruption; in the matter of sound, at any rate. A band, whence hunted up on the spur of the moment, the excited South Wennock natives, or perhaps Mrs. Fitch alone could tell, came into sight and hearing, to welcome Sir Stephen to his own town.

"A band!" he groaned, sinking into the corner of the carriage. "For me! What on earth do they take me for? People must have gone mad to-night."

Frederick could not stand that. He had had enough, as it was. Jumping out at the risk of all consequences, he got away with a laugh, leaving Sir Stephen to make the best of it.

But the band had not come to a proper understanding with itself. In point of fact, it had been enjoying a sharp quarrel. The one half were of opinion that the welcoming strains to Sir Stephen should be of a personal character and significance, such as "See the Conquering Hero comes;" the other half held that the music should partake more of a national nature, and suggested "Rule Britannia." As neither side would give way, each played its own air; an excellent way of showing independence. The result, as Sir Stephen's ears testified, was unique: the more especially as each division played its loudest, hoping to drown the noise of the adversary.

And thus, amidst cheering, shouting, running, laughing, and remonstrating, Sir Stephen Grey was chaired in state to his brother's house—Sir Stephen, who had been hunted from the town only a few short years before.

And Mr. Carlton, who had been the original cause of it all, and had certainly done his part in the hunting, was conducted by his attendants to his sojourn for the night—a place, popularly called in South Wennock the Lock-up.

CHAPTER XXIV.

MR. POLICEMAN BOWLER'S SELF-DOUBT.

THE lock-up in South Wennock was one of the institutions of the days gone by. The new police-station—new, speaking by comparison—was a small, confined place, and prisoners on remand were still conveyed to the lock-up until they should be consigned to the county prison. The lock-up, on the contrary, was a goodly-sized habitation, containing five or six rooms—one of them an ugly cell enough—and all on the ground-floor; for it was built somewhat after the manner of a huge barn, which had been divided into compartments afterwards. The building had never had any other name than the "lock-up" in the memory of South Wennock, and it was situated at the end of the town, near Mr. Carlton's residence.

He, Mr. Carlton, was conducted to this place. In the days gone by he had occasionally been called into it to visit sick prisoners; from his nearness to the spot he was almost always sent for when a doctor was required, in preference to Mr. Grey, who lived further off. What a contrast between then and now! The police, still deferential to Mr. Carlton, but feeling their responsibility, marshalled him into the identical cell spoken of, and bowed to him as he went in. Mr. Carlton knew the room, and drew in his lips, but he said nothing. Only criminals accused of very heinous crimes were ever put into it. It was called "the strong room," and was supposed to be secure against any chance of escape, from the fact of its possessing no windows. In fact, once locked into this compartment, there was no chance of it.

The first thing the police did was to search Mr. Carlton, apologizing as they did so for its being the "custom." He offered no resistance; seemed rather inclined to joke than otherwise. Barely was this done, when Lawyer Billiter arrived, and was allowed to be closeted with the prisoner.

"And now," said Mr. Carlton, beginning upon the subject that, to his mind, was the greatest puzzle of all, as he sat down on the only chair the room contained, and the lawyer contented himself with the edge of the iron bedstead, "be so good as tell me, in the first place, where that letter came from."

"I did tell you when we were in the hall. It was found in your iron safe."

"That's impossible," returned Mr. Carlton. "It never was in the safe."

"Look here, Carlton," returned the lawyer; "it's of no good

mincing matters to me. I can never pull a client out of any mess whatever if I am kept in the dark."

"It is I who am kept in the dark," said Mr. Carlton. "I am telling you the truth when I say that the letter never was in my safe at all, and that its production is to me utterly incomprehensible."

"But it was in your safe," persisted Lawyer Billiter. "If you did not know of it, that's another matter: it was certainly there; your wife, Lady Laura, found it there."

"Lady Laura!"

"The tale is this," said the lawyer, speaking without any reserve, for he could not divest himself of the idea that Mr. Carlton did know the facts. "Her ladyship has had some jealous feeling upon her lately with regard to—— but I needn't go into that. She suspected you of some escapade or other, it seems, and thought she should like to see what you kept in that safe. She went down one night—only a night or so ago—and got it open, and fished out this letter, and recognized it for the handwriting of her lost sister Clarice. She had no conception of its meaning; supposed it had got into one of your envelopes by some unaccountable mistake; but she showed it to Lady Jane Chesney, and Lady Jane showed it to the woman Smith. And it is she, Smith, who has done all the mischief."

Mr. Carlton gazed with open eyes, in which there was now more of speculative reminiscence than of wonder. For the first time it occurred to him that there was a possibility of his having put up the wrong letter that long-past night; that he might have burnt the letter from his father, and have kept the dangerous one. A strange pang shot through his heart. Was it his *wife*, then, who had been the traitor?—his wife whom he had, in his fashion, certainly loved.

"And Lady Laura made the letter public?" he exclaimed, breaking a long pause. And Mr. Billiter could not help remarking the tone of bitter pain in which the words were spoken.

"Not intending to injure you. She had no idea what the letter could mean; and, as I say, thought it had got into your possession by some mistake. She showed it to Lady Jane only because it was the handwriting of her sister Clarice."

"I never knew it," he said, in a dreamy tone. "I never knew it." But whether he meant that he never knew Clarice was her sister, or that he never knew the letter was amongst his papers, must be left to conjecture. Mr. Billiter resumed.

"Nothing would have been known of the precise manner in which the letter came to light, but for Lady Laura's self-reproach when she found the letter had led to your arrest. Just after you were taken to-day, Mother Pepperfly was at your house—by what

accident I'm sure I don't know—and Lady Jane Chesney entered while she was there. Lady Laura broke into a storm of self-reproach in her sister's arms, confessing how she had procured a skeleton key, picked the lock of your safe, and so found the letter. The fat old woman heard it all, and came forth with it. I met her, and she told me; and it seems the next she met was one of the police, and she told him, and he went straight up to Drone, and imparted it to him: and that's how it reached the ears of the magistrates. It seems as if the hand of Fate had been at work with the letter," irascibly concluded Lawyer Billiter.

Perhaps the "hand of Fate" had been at work with the letter, though in a different way from that meant by Mr. Billiter. He had only spoken in the moment's vexation. What would he have said, had he known how strangely the letter had been preserved, when Mr. Carlton had all along thought it was destroyed?

Nothing more could be done until the morning, and Mr. Billiter wished his client good night. Some gentlemen—former acquaintances—called to see Mr. Carlton: he was not yet abandoned: but the officials declined to admit any one to his presence, except his lawyer, civilly saying it was not the custom at the lock-up. Mr. Carlton was asked what he would like for supper; but he said he preferred not to take any supper, and requested the use of writing materials. They were supplied him, together with a small table to write upon, and the further use of the lamp: the latter a favour which most likely would not have been accorded to a prisoner of less degree. In fact, the police could not all at once learn to treat Mr. Carlton as a prisoner; and perhaps it might be excused to them, considering the position he had, up to the last twelve hours, held at South Wennock, and that he was as yet only under remand.

There was a youngish man who had rather lately joined the force. His name was Bowler. Mr. Carlton had since attended him in an illness, and been very kind to him, and Bowler was now especially inclined to be deferential and attentive to the prisoner. He entered the room the last thing quite late at night, to inquire whether the prisoner wanted anything, and saw on the table a letter addressed to the Lady Laura Carlton.

"Did you want it delivered to her ladyship to-night, sir?" asked the man.

"Oh no," said Mr. Carlton; "to-morrow morning will do. Let it be sent as soon as possible, Bowler."

So the man left him for the night, locking and barring the door, after civilly wishing him a good rest: which, under the circumstances, might perhaps be regarded as a superfluous compliment.

It was this same attentive official—and the man really did wish to be attentive to Mr. Carlton, and to soften his incarceration by any

means not strictly illegitimate—who was the first to enter the cell in the morning. He was coming in with an offer of early coffee; but the prisoner seemed to be fast asleep.

"No need to wake him up just yet," thought Bowler; "he can have another hour of it. Perhaps he hasn't long got to sleep."

He was silently stealing out of the cell again when he remembered the letter for Lady Laura which Mr. Carlton had wished delivered early. The man turned, took it from the table where it still lay, and carried it to an officer, older and more responsible than himself.

"I suppose I may go with it?" said he, showing the letter. "Mr. Carlton said he wanted it taken the first thing in the morning. He's not awake yet."

The older man took the letter, and turned it over and over. Every little matter connected with such a prisoner as Mr. Carlton bore an interest even for these policemen. The envelope was securely fastened down with its gum. If a thought crossed the officer that he should like to unfasten it, and see what was written there,—if an idea arose that it might be in his duty to examine any letter of the prisoner's before sending it out, he did not act upon it.

"You may take it at once," he said.

But policemen, however favourably disposed towards prisoners under their charge, are very rarely inclined to forego their own meals; and Bowler thought he might just as well take his roll and coffee before he started. This accomplished over the stove of the lock-up, he left that unpopular building, asking a question as he went out.

"Am I to wait and bring back any answer?"

"Yes, if there is one. You can inquire."

Mr. Bowler went down the street, stoically self-possessed to all appearance, but inwardly full of importance at being the bearer of the letter which was hidden in a safe pocket from the gaze of the curious public. It was a regular winter's morning, a little frosty, the sky dull and cloudy, with a patch of blue here and there. South Wennock street was already alive with bustle. Every soul in the place had resolved to obtain a footing within the town-hall that day, however unsuccessful they might have been the previous one; and they probably thought that the earlier they got up, the more chance there would be of accomplishing it.

Mr. Bowler went through Mr. Carlton's gate and gave two knocks and a ring at the front door, after the manner of the London postmen. The servant who answered it was Jonathan.

"Can I see Lady Laura Carlton?"

"No," said Jonathan, shaking his head.

With so uncompromising a denial, Mr. Bowler did not see his way quite clear to get to her ladyship and to gratify his own self-importance by answering any questions she might put to him. "Could

this be given to her at once, then?" said he. "And say if there's any answer I shall be happy to take it back to Mr. Carlton."

"My lady's not here," said the man. "She's at Cedar Lodge. She went there yesterday evening with Lady Jane."

Mr. Bowler stood a moment while he digested the news. He then returned the letter to his pocket preparatory to proceeding to Cedar Lodge. Jonathan arrested him as he was turning away.

"I say, Mr. Bowler, will it turn bad against master, do you think?" he asked, with an anxious face. "If you don't mind saying."

Mr. Bowler condescendingly replied that it might or it mightn't: these charges were always ticklish things, though folks did sometimes come out of them triumphant.

With that, he resumed his march to Cedar Lodge, where Lady Laura was. He told his business to Judith, and was admitted to the presence of her mistress. Jane was in the breakfast-room, doing what Mr. Bowler had recently done—taking a cup of coffee. She had not been in bed, for Laura had remained in a state of extreme excitement all night; now bewailing her husband and reproaching herself as the cause of all this misery; now throwing hard words to him for his treachery in the days gone by. There was one advantage in this excitement: that it would spend itself the sooner. Passion with Laura, of whatever nature, was hot and uncontrollable while it lasted, but it never lasted very long.

Calm, gentle, pale, her manner subdued even more than usual with the terrible distress that was upon them, what a contrast Jane presented to her impulsive sister! As Mr. Bowler spoke to her, he seemed to have entered into a calmer world. Half that night had been passed, by Jane, with One who can give tranquillity in life's darkest moments.

"Mr. Carlton desired that it should be sent to Lady Laura the first thing this morning, my lady," said the man, standing with his glazed hat in his hand. "So I came off with it at once."

Jane received the letter from him and looked at its address. "Is —is Mr. Carlton pretty well this morning?" she asked, in low tones.

"Mr. Carlton's not awake yet, my lady. He seemed very well last night."

"Not awake!" involuntarily exclaimed Jane, scarcely believing it within the range of possibility that Mr. Carlton could sleep at all with that dreadful charge upon him.

"Leastways, he wasn't awake when I come out of the lock-up," returned Bowler. "We often do find our prisoners sleep late in the morning, my lady. Some of them only fall asleep when they ought to be waking up."

Jane could not resist another question. In spite of her long-rooted and unaccountable dislike to Mr. Carlton, in spite of this

terrible discovery, she pitied him from her heart, as a humane Christian woman must pity such criminals.

"Does he—appear to feel it very much, Bowler?" she asked. "Does he seem overwhelmed by the thought of his position?"

"We didn't notice anything of that, my lady," was the man's answer—and it may as well be remarked that he had been engaged in a little matter of business with Lady Jane Chesney some three or four months before; the son of a poor woman in whom she was interested having got into trouble concerning certain tempting apples in a garden on the Rise. "He was quite brisk yesterday evening when he came in, my lady: there didn't seem any difference in him at all from ordinary. Of course it has got to be proved yet whether he did it or not."

Jane sighed, and left him to carry the letter to Laura, telling him she would bring back the answer if there was any. She had hesitated for a moment whether to give it to her at all, lest it might add to her state of excitement. But she felt that she had no right to keep it back from her. Who, in a case like this, the law excepted, could intercept a communication between husband and wife?

Laura—it might be that she had heard the policeman in the house—was sitting up in bed in a dressing-gown, with wild dark eyes and a flushed face. Jane would have broken the news to her gently—that there was a letter from Mr. Carlton—and so have prepared her to receive it; but Laura was not one of those who submit to be prepared, and she snatched the letter from Jane's hand and tore it open.

"Forgive me, Laura, for the disgrace and wretchedness this trouble will entail upon you. Full of perplexity and doubt as this moment is, it is of you I think, more than of myself. Whatever I may have done wrong in the past, as connected with this matter, I did it for your sake. After the production of the certificate brought forward to-day, it would seem useless to deny that I married Clarice Beauchamp. But mind! whatever confession I may make to you, I make none to the world; let them fight out the truth for themselves if they can. I never knew her but as Clarice Beauchamp; I never knew that she had claim to a higher position in life than that of a governess. She was always utterly silent to me on the subject of her family and connections; and I assumed that she was an orphan. I admired Miss Beauchamp; I was foolish enough to marry her secretly; and not until I was afterwards introduced to you, did I find out my mistake—that I had mistaken admiration for love.

"How passionately I grew to love you, I leave you to remember: you have not forgotten it. I was already scheming in my heart the

ways and means by which my hasty marriage might be dissolved, when she forced herself down to South Wennock. The news came upon me as a thunderbolt. The same spot contained herself and you, and in the dread of discovery, the fear that you might come to know that I had already a wife, I went mad. Laura, hear me! It is the honest truth, as far as I have ever since, looking back, believed —that I went mad in my desperation, and was no more accountable for my actions than a madman is.

"And there's the whole truth in few words. When my senses came to me--and they came to me that same night—I awoke from what seemed an impossible dream. *All* that could be done then was to guard, if I might, the secret, and to put on armour against the whole human race; armour that should stand between myself and the outer world.

"It is you, Laura, who have at length brought discovery upon me. Oh, why could you not have trusted me wholly? Whatever clouds there might have been in our married life, I declare upon my honour that they had passed, and any later suspicions you may have entertained were utterly groundless. Had you come honestly to me and said 'I want to see what you keep in that safe in the drug-room,' I would willingly have given you the key. There was nothing in the safe, as far as I knew, that you and all the world might not have seen; nothing that could work me harm; for this letter, that it seems you found, I thought I had burnt long ago. But, having found the letter, why did you not bring it to *me* and ask for an explanation, rather than give it to Lady Jane? Surely a husband should be closer than a sister! I might not have told you the truth; it is not likely that I should; but I should have explained sufficient to satisfy you, and on my part I should have learnt the inconceivable fact, that Clarice Beauchamp was Clarice Chesney. Now and then there has been something in Lucy's face —ay, and in yours—that has reminded me of her.

"But, my darling, if I allude to this—to your finding the letter—I do it not to reproach you. On the contrary, I write only to give you my full and free forgiveness. The betrayal, I am certain, was not intentional, and I know that you are feeling it keenly. I forgive you, Laura, with all my loving heart.

"I could not go to rest without this word of explanation. Think of me with as little harshness as you can, Laura.

"Your unhappy husband,

"L. C."

Lady Jane returned to the policeman. There was no answer then, she said: but she bade him tell Mr. Carlton that Lady Laura would write to him in the course of the day.

Mr. Policeman Bowler recommenced his promenade back again. Nodding his head with gracious condescension from side to side, when the public greeted him, as it was incumbent on an officer, confidentially engaged in so important a cause, to do. Half a hundred would have assailed him with questions and remarks, but Mr. Bowler knew his dignity better than to respond to them, and bore on his way erect and inscrutable.

Little Wilkes the barber was standing at his shop door and ran up to him. The two were on private terms of friendship, and Mr. Bowler was sometimes regaling himself surreptitiously with supper in the barber's back-parlour when he was supposed to be engaged in the zealous performance of duty. "I say, Bowler, do tell! *Is* the hour ten or eleven that the case is coming on?"

"Ten, sharp," replied Bowler. "I'll find you a place if you are there an hour beforehand." As he spoke the last words, and went on, a slight turning in the street brought him in sight of the lock-up. And there appeared to be some sort of stir going on within that official building. A hum of voices could be heard even at this distance, and three or four persons were dashing out of it in a state of commotion.

"What's up?" cried Mr. Bowler to himself, as he increased his speed. "What's up?" he repeated aloud, seizing upon the first runner he met.

"It's something about Mr. Carlton," was the answer. "They are saying he has escaped. There seems a fine hubbub in the lock-up."

Escaped! Mr. Carlton escaped! Mr. Policeman Bowler did the least sensible thing he could have done while a prisoner was escaping; he stood still and stared. A question was rushing wildly through his mind: could he, himself, by misadventure, have left the strong room unbarred?

CHAPTER XXV.

ESCAPED.

When South Wennock awoke on that eventful morning, its chief thought was, how it could best secure a place in the town-hall, by fighting, bribery, or stratagem, to hear the conclusion of Mr. Carlton's examination. Vague reports had floated about the town on the previous evening, of the witnesses likely to be examined; and the name of Mr. Carlton's wife was mentioned for one, as touching the finding of the letter. Half the town scouted the idea; but at least it added to the general ferment: and as a matter of course every one rose with the lark, and breakfasted by candle-

light. It was, you are aware, in the dead of winter, when the days are at the shortest.

Perhaps of all South Wennock, the one to think most of the prisoner with intense, sorrowful pity, was Sir Stephen Grey. Few men possessed the milk of human kindness as did he. He dwelt not on the past dark story, its guilt and its strategy; he thought of the unhappy prisoner, alone in his solitary cell: and he longed to soothe, if possible, his disgrace and suffering by any means in his power. So the first thing Sir Stephen did, after taking a hasty breakfast at his brother's table, was to put on his hat and go down to the lock-up. This was just at the precise time that Mr. Policeman Bowler was marching home in all self-importance from his errand to Cedar Lodge.

As Stephen Grey gained the lock-up from one quarter, Lawyer Billiter was observed approaching it from another; and the policeman in charge, seeing these visitors, began to think he ought to have aroused his prisoner earlier. He sent one of his staff to do it now.

"Ask him to get up at once; and then come back and take in his breakfast," were the orders. "And tell him that Lawyer Billiter's coming down the street. Good morning, Sir Stephen."

"Well, Jones!" cried Sir Stephen, in his open, affable manner—for the man had been one of the police staff in the old days, and Stephen Grey had known him well: "how are you? A cold morning! And how's Mr. Carlton?"

"He's all right, sir, thank you. I've just sent in to awaken him."

"What, is he not awake yet?" cried Sir Stephen, rather wondering.

"Not yet, sir. Unless he has awakened since Bowler went in, and that's about three quarters of an hour ago. Good morning, Mr. Billiter!" added the policeman in a parenthesis, as the lawyer entered. "Mr. Carlton wrote a letter to his wife last night, and Bowler has stepped down with it. But what he's stopping for I can't make out, unless she's writing a long answer——"

"Then you had no business to let Bowler step down with it," interrupted the lawyer sharply. "You should have kept it until I came. Didn't I tell you I should be here the first thing, Jones? You are no more to be trusted than a child!"

"Where was the harm of sending it?" asked Jones, rather taken aback by this reprimand. "It mayn't be quite strict practice to let letters go out unopened, but one stretches a point for Mr. Carlton."

"The harm may be more than you think for," returned the lawyer as hotly as he had spoken the previous day in the hall. "He *will* do things out of his own head, and try to conduct his case with his own hands. Look at the fight I had to keep him quiet yesterday!"

"He wrote the letter last night, and asked that it should be taken

to her ladyship the first thing this morning," returned the man in injured tones.

"And if he did write it, and ask it, you needn't have sent it. You might have brought the letter out here and kept it until I came round. Who's to know what dangerous admission he may have made in it? I can see what it is: between you all, I shan't have a loophole of escape for him."

"Do you think he will escape?" asked Sir Stephen, interrupting the angry lawyer.

"Well, no, I don't, to speak the truth," was the candid admission. "But that's no reason why I shouldn't be allowed to do my best for him. If he does escape——"

Lawyer Billiter was interrupted. The man, sent into Mr. Carlton's cell, made his appearance in a rather strange condition. He came bounding in, and stood with the door in his hand, mouth and eyes alike open, and struggling for words. Mr. Jones saw there was something wrong, and rushed to the strong room.

Two minutes and he was back again, his face very pale. Yes, even the hardened face (in one sense of the word) of Mr. Policeman Jones had turned pale.

"Mr. Carlton *has* escaped, gentlemen. In spite of us all and of the law."

And Lawyer Billiter, in his impulse, ran to the cell to regale his eyes with its emptiness, and two or three underlings, having caught the word "escaped," rushed forth from the lock-up, partly to give vent to their feelings, partly from a vague idea of pursuing the prisoner. Sir Stephen Grey followed Jones and the lawyer to the cell.

Yes, the prisoner had escaped. Not escaped in the ordinary acceptation of that word, as was just then agitating the crowd outside the lock-up, and raising the horrified hair of Mr. Policeman Bowler; but in a different manner. Mr. Carlton had escaped by death.

On the rude bed in the cell lay the inanimate remains of what was once Lewis Carlton, the active, moving, accountable human being. Accountable for the actions done in the body, whether they had been good or whether they had been evil.

The place was forthwith in commotion: far greater commotion than when the escape was assumed to have been of a different nature. The natural conclusion jumped to was "poison;" that he must have had poison of some subtle nature concealed upon his person, and had taken it. The runners changed their route: and instead of galloping up by-lanes and other obscure outlets from the town, in chase of the fugitive, they rushed to the house of Mr. John Grey, forgetting that Sir Stephen was already present.

No doctor, however, could avail with Mr. Carlton. He had been

dead for several hours. He must have been long dead and cold when Mr. Policeman Bowler had stood in his cell and concluded that he was fast asleep; and Mr. Policeman Bowler never overcame the dreadful regret that attacked him for not having been the first to find it out, and so have secured notoriety to himself for ever.

The most cut-up of any one, to use a familiar term, was Mr. Jones. That functionary stood against the pallet looking down at what lay on it, his countenance more crest-fallen than any policeman's that was ever yet seen. It is curious to say, that while Bowler took the blame to himself when it was thought Mr. Carlton had escaped by flight, Jones was taking it now.

"To think I should have been so green as to let him deceive me in that way!" he burst forth at length. "'You needn't be particular, Jones,' he says to me with a sort of laugh when I was searching him. 'I've nothing about me that you want.' Well, I *am* a fool!"

"And didn't you search him?" cried Lawyer Billiter.

"Yes, I did search him. But perhaps I wasn't quite so particular over it as I might have been; his easy manner threw me off my guard. At any rate, I'll vow there was no poison in his pockets; I *did* effectually search them."

Sir Stephen Grey rose up from examining the prisoner, over whom he had been bent. "I don't think you need torment yourself, Jones," he said. "I see no trace of poison here. My belief is, that the death has been a natural one."

"No?" exclaimed Mr. Jones with reviving hope. "You don't say so, sir, do you?"

"It is impossible to speak with any certainty as yet," replied Sir Stephen, "but I can detect no appearance whatever of poison. One thing appears certain; that he must have died in his sleep. Look at his calm countenance."

A calmer countenance in death it was not well possible to see. The wonder was, that a man lying under the accusation of such a crime could wear a face so outwardly placid. The eyes were closed, the brow was smooth, there was a faint smile upon the lips. No sign of struggle, whether physical or mental, was there, no trace of any parting battle between the body and the spirit. Lewis Carlton looked altogether at rest.

"I fancy it must have been the heart," remarked Sir Stephen. "I remember years ago, just before I left South Wennock, I met Carlton at a *post-mortem* examination. It was over that poor fellow, that milkman who dropped down dead in the road; you must remember it, Jones. And in talking, Carlton casually remarked that he had some doubts about his own heart being sound. How strange that it should occur to me now; I had quite forgotten it;

and how more than strange that I should be the one, of all others, first to examine *him!*"

"Poor fellow!" exclaimed Lawyer Billiter, gazing on the still countenance. "There's something very awful in these sudden deaths, Sir Stephen, whether they proceed from—from one cause or another."

Sir Stephen bowed his head. They quitted the cell, locking the door. Mr. Jones proceeded to deal with the intruders that were filling the outer room, and Sir Stephen went forth to carry the news to Cedar Lodge. Bowler had said that Lady Laura was there.

The first to come to Sir Stephen was Lucy. Weak from her recent illness, the shock of this dreadful business had been unnaturally great. Since the night of Judith's narrative she had remained in a sad state of nervous excitement; and she fell sobbing into Sir Stephen's arms.

"Hush, child, hush! This is hard for you. Brighter days may be in store, Lucy."

"But think what it is for Laura! And for Mr. Carlton himself. Laura has had a letter from him, and he says he was mad when he did it. He must have been mad, you know; and we can't help pitying him!"

How like Laura Carlton! how like the impulsive sailor-earl! Who else would have made *any* of the contents of that letter public? Laura had relieved her feelings by a storm of passionate sobs after reading it, and had then lifted her head from her pillow to utter its information aloud.

Jane came in. "I heard you were at South Wennock," she faltered, as she shook hands with Sir Stephen. "What a dreadful blow this is to us! And—the consequences have to come," she added, lowering her voice. "If the worst supervenes, Laura will surely never live through the disgrace."

He knew to what she alluded. Sir Stephen leaned towards her. "There will be no further disgrace, Lady Jane," he whispered. "I have come up to tell you so."

She paused a moment, supposing Sir Stephen did not understand. "He will be committed—as we hear—to-day for trial, Sir Stephen. And the result of that trial—we, of course, know only too well what it may be. Nothing can save him from standing his trial."

"One thing can, my dear lady. Nay—no, I was not meaning his escape by flight, as was first assumed down there"—nodding his head in the supposed direction of the lock-up; "in these days escape is next to impossible. There is another sort of escape over which human laws have no control."

Jane sat breathless; silent; half divining what he had to tell.

"I am a bad one at preparing people for evil tidings," cried Sir

Stephen. "My brother John and Frederick are worth ten of me. But—always setting his poor, unhappy self aside—my news must be good for you and Lady Laura, cruel as it may seem to say so. Mr. Carlton is dead, Lady Jane."

"Dead!" she repeated, as the dread fear of what its cause might be arose to her, and every vestige of colour forsook her trembling lips.

"No, I don't think there's any fear of that; I don't, indeed; I can find no trace whatever of any cause, and therefore I fancy it must have been heart disease. Violent mental emotion will bring that on, you know, Lady Jane, where there's a predisposition to it."

"Yes," she answered, mechanically, hearing nothing, seeing nothing still, but the one great fear. Had Mr. Carlton been her husband, Jane would have passed her future life in praying for him.

"Do you know whether he suspected, of late years, that he might be subject to it?"

"To what?" she asked, striving to collect herself.

"Any affection of the heart."

"I never heard of it; never. If it was so, I should think Laura would know of it."

Poor Laura! How were they to break the tidings to her? She was the most uncertain woman in existence. One moment her mood was one of intense bitterness towards Mr. Carlton; the next it had changed, and she was weeping for him, bewailing him with loving words, reproaching herself as the cause of all the present misery. Jane went in, wishing any one else had to undertake the task. Laura's frantic attacks—and she was sure to have one now—were so painful to her. She found Laura in bed still; her head buried in her pillow, her sobs choking her, and Mr. Carlton's dying letter—it might surely be called such—clutched in her hand. Jane sat down by her side in silence, until calmness should supervene; it would be better to break the news when Laura was physically exhausted; and Jane waited,—her own heart aching. Sir Stephen would not leave the house until the news was broken to her.

Jane Chesney had always been of a thoughtful nature, striving to do her duty in whatsoever line it lay before her; and, though she had not been without her trials—sore trials—she had learned that great boon, a peaceful conscience: she had learned that far greater boon, better than any other that can be found on earth—perfect trust in God.

Later in the day the official medical examination was made of the remains of Mr. Carlton; and, strange to say, the cause of death continued to be unknown. No sign of poison of any nature whatever could be traced; no symptom of anything amiss with the heart.

If he had really taken poison, it was of too subtle a nature to be discovered; if he had died from natural causes, nothing remained of them to show. It might be possible that mental excitement had suddenly snapped the chord of life. If so, it was a singular fact; but the problem was one that would never be set at rest.

When the first startling shock of the death had subsided, South Wennock awoke to the fact that it was particularly ill-used in being cut off from all further revelation as to the past affairs of Mrs. Crane —as we may as well call her to the end. The second day's examination, and the subsequent trial, had been looked forward to by South Wennock as a very boon in life's dull romance; and for Mr. Carlton to go off in the sudden manner he had done, cheated their curiosity almost beyond endurance. There were so many points in the past history that would never now be cleared up.

They could not be cleared up for others, who owned a nearer interest in them than South Wennock. There was one particular that would remain a puzzle to Jane Chesney for ever—why Clarice had not married in her full name. She could understand her keeping the marriage a secret from her family, knowing their prejudices on the score of birth, and that Mr. Carlton was then not even well established in practice, and was scarcely justified in marrying at all; but she could not understand why Clarice should have concealed her true name and family from her husband. It was impossible, of course, that the slightest doubt could have occurred to her of its affecting the legality of the marriage; but what reason was there for suppressing her name at all? Jane could only come to one conclusion, and that a very poor one: that Clarice had thought it best to suppress it in all ways until Mr. Carlton should be doing well. Then she would say to him: I was not Miss Beauchamp. I was Miss Chesney, grandniece to the Earl of Oakburn, and we will go and declare our marriage to them. It might have been so, for Clarice had a world of romance within her. Again, there was that oath she had taken in a wild moment, not to tell her name: was it possible that she deemed it binding upon her for ever? Mr. Carlton's motive for concealing his marriage will have been gathered from certain passages at the commencement of this history: he stood in awe of his father. Mr. Carlton the elder had entirely set his face against his son's marrying, and Lewis was dependent upon him. Men do not in general—at least, educated men, like Mr. Carlton—plunge into crime all at once. When Mr. Carlton grew to think of a marriage with Miss Beauchamp, he sounded his father on the subject, stating at the same time that the lady, though every inch a lady, was only a governess. Had Mr. Carlton the elder lent a favourable ear to the petition, all the dark future might have been avoided; for the marriage would have taken place publicly. But

he did not do so. Whether the word governess offended him, certain it was, that he was unnecessarily austere and bitter, quietly assuring his son that he should disinherit him; and Mr. Carlton knew only too well that his father was one to keep his word. Once married, of course there was every necessity for keeping the fact a secret; and in this Clarice Carlton seconded her husband. How little did either of them foresee what it would lead to! Forge the first link in a chain in deceit, and no living being can tell to what length it will go, or how it will end.

Some slight compensation to South Wennock was afforded by the funeral of the little boy. For the excitement attendant on that ceremony was so great as to operate as a sort of balm to the disappointed feelings of the people. Every one turned out to witness it. All who had had anything to do in the remotest degree with the past tragedy deemed themselves possessed of a right to follow the coffin at a short or long distance. Mrs. Pepperfly, Mrs. Gould, even Dick, Mr. Grey's surgery boy of yore, now converted into a rising market-gardener nearly six feet high, were amidst the uninvited attendants. It was a fine morning, the air clear and cold. Mrs. Smith walked next the coffin; for she would resign that place to none. Lady Jane Chesney had intimated a wish to bury the child —that is, to defray its expenses; and had that lady intimated a wish to bury *herself*, Mrs. Smith could not have shown herself more aggrieved. The child had been as her own all its life, she resentfully said, and, at least, she thought she had earned the right of buying him his grave. Jane acquiesced, with an apology, and felt sorry she had spoken. The funeral moved down the Rise from Blister Lane, passing Mr. Carlton's residence, where all that remained of him now lay, having been removed there, until he should be interred. The Law had not cared to keep possession of his body when the spirit had flown. Yes; they carried the little coffin past the house where the dead lay: carried it to St. Mark's churchyard, to the side of the ill-fated mother, who had lain there so long in its quiet corner: and they buried the child by his right name, Lewis George Carlton.

Sir Stephen Grey and his son returned to London together. Lady Grey knew nothing of the events recently enacted, and they imparted them to her. She could not get over her shock of astonishment.

"What do you say to my boyish fancy, now, mother?" asked Frederick. "Did I wrong Carlton?"

"Hush!" she said. "It seems to me to savour of that faculty said to exist in Scotland—second-sight. Oh, Frederick, how could Mr. Carlton *live*, knowing what he had done?"

"Poor fellow!" spoke Frederick, as impulsively as Sir Stephen

himself could have said it. "Rely upon it, he must have paid the penalty of the crime, over and over again. He could only have existed in the constant dread of discovery; he was not without a conscience. And what must that have been to him?"

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE TURBULENT WAVES LAID TO REST.

THE time rolled on. Another year was in, and its months glided away to the autumn. It had been no eventful year, this; rather too many events had been crowded into the preceding one, and this had been calm—so calm, as to be almost monotonous. The storm had spent itself, the turbulent waves had laid themselves to rest.

Lady Oakburn had returned from the Continent as soon as she heard of the trouble connected with Mr. Carlton, travelling in the dead of winter; and Lucy Chesney quitted South Wennock for her own home. Her marriage with Frederick Grey had been postponed. It was to have taken place in the spring, but all united in agreeing that it would be more seemly to delay it until the autumn.

Laura had remained with Jane. Lady Oakburn had asked her to come to her, and make her house her home. Many friends had stepped forward, and pressed her to come and pay them a long visit; but Laura had chosen to stay with Jane, very much, it must be confessed, to Jane's own surprise. For a few short weeks Laura's grief had been excessive; grief intermixed, as before, with moments of anger against Mr. Carlton for the disgrace he had brought upon himself. But all that wore away, and Laura gradually grew very much her old self again, and worried Judith almost to death with her caprice, for the most part concerning the ornaments and trimmings of her black dresses.

They sat together, Jane and her sister, on a bright morning in September. Laura was in a petulant mood. Her pretty foot, peeping from beneath her crape dress, tapping the carpet impatiently; her widow's cap, a marvel of tasty arrangement, just lodged on the back of her head. The recent bugbear of Lady Laura's life had been this very article of attire—the widow's cap; it was the cause of the present moment's rebellion. Laura had grown to hate the cap beyond anything: not from any association with the past it might be supposed to call up, but simply as a matter of personal adornment; and she believed Jane to be her greatest enemy, because she held to it that Laura could not, and must not, throw off the caps until a twelvemonth had elapsed from the death of Mr. Carlton.

And yet Laura need not have disliked the cap. A more lovely face than hers, as it looked now, with her rich hair braided, and the white crape lappets thrown back, it is impossible to conceive. The present trouble was this: Laura would not go up to Lucy's wedding, now about to take place, unless she could leave the odious caps behind her. Jane assured her it would not be proper to appear without them.

"Then I will not go at all," Laura was saying with pouting lips. "If I can only appear before people as a guy, I'll stay where I am. How would you like to be made into an old woman, Jane, if you were as young as I am? Why don't you take to the caps yourself, if you are so fond of them?"

"I am not a widow," said Jane.

"I wish you were! you would know what the caps are, then. They never could have been invented for any one under fifty. And they are enough to give one brain-fever."

"Only three months longer, Laura," said Jane, soothingly, "and the twelvemonth will have expired. I am *sure* you would not yourself like to leave them off sooner."

"Of what use are they?" sharply asked Laura. "They don't make me regret my—my husband either more or less than I do. I can mourn him if I please without the cap as much as I can with it: and they ruin the hair! Every one says it is most unhealthy to keep the head covered."

"But you don't cover yours," Jane ventured to remark, as she glanced at the gossamer article perched on Laura's hair.

"No, but you would like me to. Why should you stand out for the wretched things, Jane? My belief is, you are jealous of me. It's not my fault if you are not particularly handsome."

Jane took it all meekly. When Laura fell into this temper, it was best to let her say what she would. And Jane thought she talked chiefly for the sake of opposition, for she believed that Laura herself was sufficiently sensitive to appearances *not* to give up the caps before the year had gone by.

But the result was, that Lady Laura did not go up to London to the wedding. Perhaps she had never intended to go. Judith thought so, and privately said so to her mistress. The following year Laura was to spend with Lady Oakburn—the heavy widow's silks and the offending caps left behind her at South Wennock; and Judith felt almost sure that Lady Laura had not meant to show herself in town until divested of these unbecoming appendages.

So Jane went up alone, arriving only the day before the wedding. Judith as usual was with her; and this was another grievance for Laura—to be left without a maid. In a fit of caprice—it must be called so—Lady Laura had discharged her own maid, Stiffing, at the

time of Mr. Carlton's death, protesting that old faces about her only put her in mind of the past; and Judith had since waited upon her.

The rest of Mr. Carlton's establishment had been broken up with the home. But Lady Jane would not go to town without Judith, and my Lady Laura had to do the best she could under the circumstances. It may as well here be mentioned that the money left to Clarice by the Earl of Oakburn, and which had since been accumulating, Jane had made over in equal portions to Laura and Lucy, herself taking none of it.

It was a cloudless day, that of the wedding—cloudless in all senses of the word. The September sky was blue and bright, the guests bidden to the ceremony were old and true friends. Portland Place was gay with spectators; carriages dashed about; and Lady Jane seemed to be in a maze of whirl and confusion until she was quietly seated at the breakfast-table.

Man and wife for ever! They had stood at the altar side by side, and sworn it faithfully, earnestly, with a full and steadfast purpose in their hearts and on their lips. Not until they were alone together in the chariot, returning home again, could Frederick Grey realize the fact that she was his, as she sat beside him in her young beauty, her true affection—every pulse of her heart beating for him.

There was nothing in the least grand about the wedding, unless it was Jane's new pearl silk of amazing rustle and richness, and a gentleman in a flaxen wig and a very screwed-in-waist, who sat at Lady Oakburn's right hand at the table. He was Lord Something—a tenth cousin or so of the late earl's; and he had condescended to come out of his retirement and his gout, to which disorder he was a martyr—it ran in the Oakburn family—to give Lucy away. John Grey and his wife were in town for it, and the Reverend Mr. Lycett, now the incumbent of St. Mark's Church at South Wennock, had come up to read the marriage ceremony—they were all visiting Sir Stephen and Lady Grey.

It was the first time Jane had seen Sir Stephen since the previous December. She thought he looked worn and ill, as if his health were failing. She feared, as she looked at him, that the young M.D. opposite to her by Lucy's side might become Sir Frederick sooner than he ought to do in the natural course of events. But Sir Stephen made light of his ailments, and told Jane that he was only knocked up with too much work. He was merry as ever; and said now that Frederick had become a respectable member of society he should turn over the chief worry of the patients to him, and nurse himself into a young man again. "Do you know," he cried in a whisper, in Jane's ear, his merry tones changing, "I am glad Lady Laura did not come. The sight of her face here to-day would have put me too much in mind of poor Carlton."

Of course the chief personage at the table was the young Earl of Oakburn. The young earl had planted himself in the seat next to Lucy, and wholly declined to quit it for any other. There, with Pompey behind his chair (who was a greater slave to the young gentleman than ever he had been to Captain Chesney), and his hand in Lucy's, he made himself at home.

"I am so glad to see how Frank improves!" Jane remarked to Sir Stephen. "He looks very much stronger."

"Stronger!" returned Sir Stephen: "he's as strong as a little lion; and would have been so long ago but for his mother and Lucy's having coddled him."

"I am not coddled now," cried Frank. "And mamma says I shall soon go to Eton."

"The very best place for you," cried Sir Stephen. "I hope it's true."

"Oh, it's true," said Lady Oakburn. "He is strong enough for it already, Sir Stephen: in spite of the coddling," she added, with a smile.

"Thanks to me, my lady, for keeping you within bounds. Judith! that's never you in that white topknot!"

Judith laughed, turned, and curtsied. Judith was waiting at the chocolate table, her hands encased, perhaps for the first time in Judith's life, in delicate white kid gloves.

"Why can't Lucy come back to-night?" suddenly demanded the young earl, appealing to the table generally.

"Because Lucy's mine now, and I can't spare her," whispered Frederick Grey, leaning behind Lucy to speak.

An indignant pause. "She's not yours."

"Indeed she is."

"You have not bought her!"

"Yes, I have. I bought her with the gold ring that is now upon her finger."

Lord Oakburn had seen the ring put on, and sundry disagreeable convictions arose within him. "Is she quite bought?" he asked.

"Quite. She can never be sold back again."

"But why need she go away? Can't you let her stop here?"

"I'm afraid I can't, Frank. She shall come and see you soon."

About ten days after this, Frederick Grey and his wife were at South Wennock. It had been arranged that they should pay Jane a short visit before returning to town to take possession of their new home.

There had not been many changes at South Wennock. The greatest perhaps was at the late house of Mr. and Lady Laura Carlton. It had been converted into a "Ladies' College," and the old surgery side-door had now a large brass plate upon it, announc-

ing "Pupils' Entrance." The Widow Gould flourished still, and had not yet ceased talking about the events of the previous December; and Mrs. Pepperfly was decidedly more robust than ever, and had been in very great request this year from her near connection with the events which had brought the tragedy to light. Mrs. Smith had gone back to Scotland. She had a tie there, she said—her husband's grave.

Just as they had been sitting nearly a fortnight before, so they were sitting now, the Ladies Jane and Laura. Laura, in spite of her cap and her widowhood, had contrived to make herself look very charming; almost as much so as the fair young bride, who ran in to them from the carriage, radiant with happiness.

But Lucy's gaiety, and her husband's also, faded to a sort of timid reserve at the sight of Laura. It was the first time they had met since the cruel trouble, and it was impossible but that their minds should go back to it. Laura noted their change of manner, and resented it according to her hasty fashion, taking some idea into her head that they considered she ought to be treated with sobriety in her character of widow; whilst she did not think so at all.

They had arrived in time for a late dinner, and in the evening Frederick said he would just run down as far as his uncle's. Somehow it had been a dull and silent dinner. Try as Frederick and Lucy would, they could *not* divest themselves of the impression left by the past, in this first interview with Mr. Carlton's wife. Laura, in a pet, retired early.

"Jane, how well Laura is looking!" were Lucy's first words. "I had not expected to see her half so well, and all her old light manner has returned. Has she forgotten Mr. Carlton?"

"Quite sufficiently so to marry again," replied Jane, somewhat heedlessly. The words shocked Lucy.

"Oh, Jane! *Marry* again—*yet!*"

Jane looked up and smiled at the mistake. "I did not mean that, Lucy; of course not. But I should think it an event not unlikely to happen in time. She said one day that she would give a great deal to be able to discard the tarnished name of Carlton. She is young enough still, very good-looking, of good birth, and upon *her*, personally, there rests no slur; altogether, it has struck me as being probable. Next year, which she is to pass with Lady Oakburn, she will be in her element—the world."

"Jane," said Lucy, awaking from a reverie, "I wonder *you* never married."

A sudden flush came into Jane Chesney's cheeks, and her drooping eyelids were not raised.

"I think it must have been your own fault."

"You are right Lucy," said Jane, rallying. "I was so nearly

being married once that the wedding-day was fixed. I afterwards broke it off."

"What ever for?" exclaimed Lucy, impulsively, as the thought occurred to her how very grievous a catastrophe it would have been had *her* wedding been broken off.

"We were attached to each other too," resumed Jane, in tones which proved that her mind had gone back to the past and was absorbed in it. "He was of good family, as good as ours, but he was not rich, and he was hoping for a Government appointment. We were to have married, however, on what he had, and the wedding-day was settled. Then came mamma's illness and death, which, of course, caused the marriage to be postponed. Afterwards he received his appointment; it was in India; and then, Lucy, came the bitter trial of choosing between him and my father. My mother had said to me on her death-bed, 'Stay always with your father, Jane; he will be lost without you when I am gone,' and I promised to do so. She did not know that William would be going abroad."

"And you gave him up to remain at home?"

"Yes; I thought it my duty; and I loved papa almost as well, in another way, as I loved him. There was a little creature in my care also, besides: you, Lucy."

"Oh, I am so sorry," exclaimed Lucy, clasping her hands. "You should not have minded me."

Jane smiled. "I got over it in time. And, Lucy, do you know, I think it likely that I am best as I am."

"Where is he now, Jane? Perhaps he may come home yet and marry you!" And Jane laughed, Lucy's tone was so eager.

"He has had a wife a great many years, and I don't know how many children. Lucy, dear, my romance wore itself out long ago."

"But it must be so dreadful a thing to have your marriage broken off," said Lucy, in a half whisper. "I think it would have killed me, Jane."

"Very dreadful indeed it must seem to you, no doubt, in these early days," said Jane. "But, my dear, people don't die so easily as that."

Lucy crimsoned: was Jane laughing at her? She began to speak of something else.

"Jane," she said, "was it not a singular thing that you and papa —and myself a little—took that strange dislike to Mr. Carlton?"

"It must have been instinct, as I believe."

"While Laura and—I suppose—Clarice were so greatly attracted by him. It strikes me as being very strange. Oh, what an unhappy thing it was that Clarice ever went away from home."

"All the regret in the world will not mend it now; I strive not to

think of it. I never—as a matter of course, Laura being here—talk of the past. Lucy," she added, drawing her young sister to her, "I can see that you are happy."

A bright smile and a brighter blush answered the words.

"My child, take a caution from me," proceeded Jane: "have no concealments from your husband, and never disobey him."

"There is no need to tell me that, Jane," said Lucy, with some surprise. "How could I do either?"

"No, I believe there is none; but we cannot forget, my dear, that concealment or disobedience, following on their rebellious marriages, brought the ill upon Laura and Clarice. Had not Clarice come to South Wennock, in all probability her tragical end would never have occurred, and she came in direct disobedience to the will and command of her husband. Had Laura not dishonourably forced her husband's private locks, the awful disclosure might never have burst upon her. Be very cautious, Lucy; love, reverence, and obey your husband."

A conscious smile played around Lucy's lips, and at that moment Judith came in. Lady Laura wanted her sister Jane.

"It does not seem like the old room, Judith," Lucy said, as her sister left it. "I should scarcely have known it again."

For it was a very smart drawing-room now, and somewhat inconveniently crowded with ornaments and furniture. Laura's handsome grand piano took up a good portion of it.

"True, my lady," was Judith's answer. "When the sale took place at Mr. Carlton's after his death, Lady Laura reserved a great many of the things, and they had to be brought here."

"Where's Stiffing?" asked Lucy.

"She soon found a place after Lady Laura discharged her, but she did not remain in it, and she has left South Wennock. She got mobbed one evening," added Judith, lowering her voice.

"Got mobbed!" echoed Lucy, staring at Judith.

"It was in this way, my lady: the news got abroad somehow that it was Stiffing who fetched the skeleton key for Lady Laura, that—that past night, and a number of rude boys set upon Stiffing one spring evening; they hooted her and pelted her and chased her, called her a skeleton, and altogether behaved very badly to her."

"But if she did fetch the key, Lady Laura sent her for it."

"Oh yes, but boys and men, when they set upon a body like that, my lady, only think of the victim before them. Stiffing wouldn't stop in South Wennock after that, but gave up her place."

"How shamefully unjust!" exclaimed Lucy.

Her indignation had scarcely spent itself when Frederick Grey entered, and Judith retired.

"Did you think I was lost, Lucy?"

"No; but I began to think you were long; I suppose you could not get away?"

"That's how it was. John's children hid my hat; and Charles Lycett and his wife were spending the evening there. I don't know what good wishes they don't send to Lady Lucy Grey," he added, drawing her to him, and keeping his hands on her waist.

Lucy laughed.

"What brings you alone?" he asked. "Where are they?"

"Laura went up to her room, and she just now sent for Jane. Frederick, Jane has been giving me a lecture."

"What about?"

"She bade me love and reverence you always," she whispered, lifting her eyes momentarily to his. "I told her the injunction was not needed: do you think it is?"

He drew her closer to him, and covered her face with his warm kisses.

"Once, in this room—I have never told you, Frederick—I passed some miserable hours. It was the night following the examination of Mr. Carlton. Of course it was altogether miserable enough then, but I had a fear on my own score, from which the others were free: I thought the disgrace would cause you—not to have me."

"You foolish child! you little goose! Lucy, my darling," he continued, in altered tones, "you could not really have feared it. Had disgrace attached itself to every relative you possessed in the world, there would only have been the greater happiness to me in shielding you from it. My wife, you know it."

She looked at him with the prettiest smile and blush ever seen, and he released her suddenly, for Jane came in.

THE END.

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[*Continued on next page.*

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